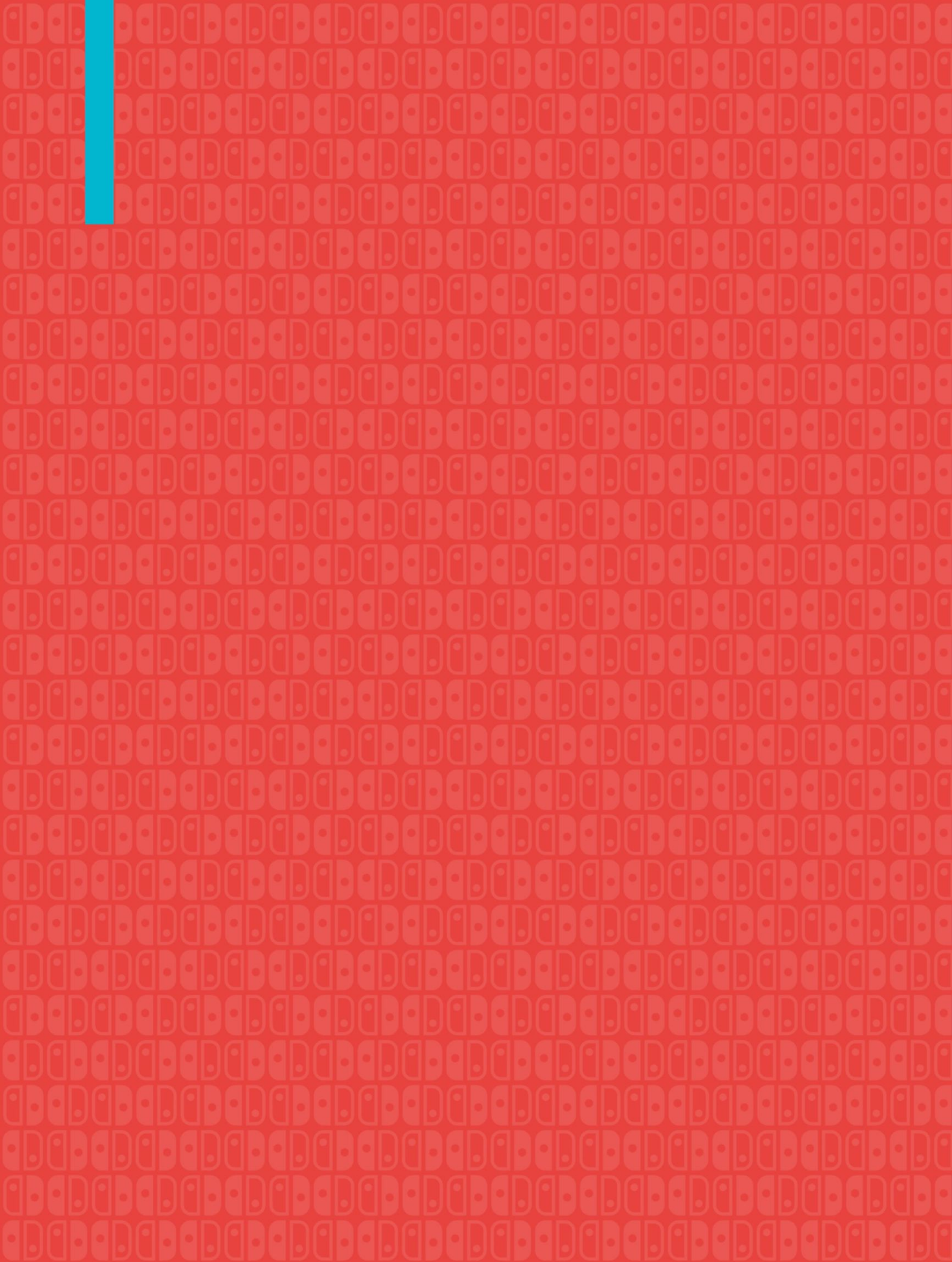
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HAS NINTENDO GOT IT RIGHT THIS TIME?

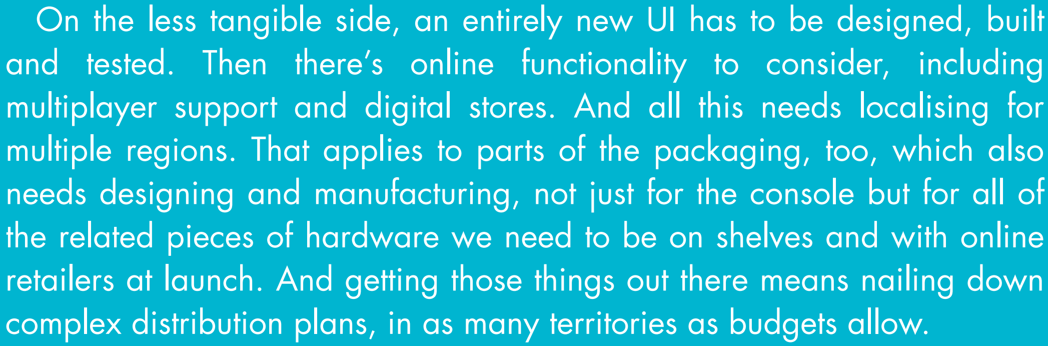




If only launching a console was like clicking your fingers

Of all the mountains scaled by people working in the videogame industry, the toughest one to crack is introducing a new console platform. When you pull the process apart and lay out all of the separate pieces, in fact, it's a wonder that there are three major players still at it today.

Proposed specs and functionality come first. Clearly this new console has to do something people haven't seen before. Then comes translating those concepts into a plan for silicon that can be produced affordably at scale. We need to engineer a casing to put it in, of course. And we can't very well launch a new console with old controllers, so we'll need to either adapt an existing design or, much more problematically, come up with something altogether new. What about sourcing manufacturing for all this?



On the less tangible side, an entirely new UI has to be designed, built and tested. Then there's online functionality to consider, including multiplayer support and digital stores. And all this needs localising for multiple regions. That applies to parts of the packaging, too, which also needs designing and manufacturing, not just for the console but for all of the related pieces of hardware we need to be on shelves and with online retailers at launch. And getting those things out there means nailing down complex distribution plans, in as many territories as budgets allow.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. What about marketing? Preorder programmes? And the pricing strategy! Quite an important one, that. On and on we go, all of it involving thousands of people collaborating across the world – and ideally in secret, an increasingly tall order in an age when leaks are such hot currency across all corners of the Internet.

And still we haven't even talked about the most important aspect: the games. How many do we need at launch? Which thirdparty publishers are on board? Are we *certain* we have the all-important killer app?

With Switch, then, Nintendo has been a little bit busy lately. On p56 we look at how well its intricate proposition is finally coming together.



Exclusive subscriber edition



games



Hype

Play

98

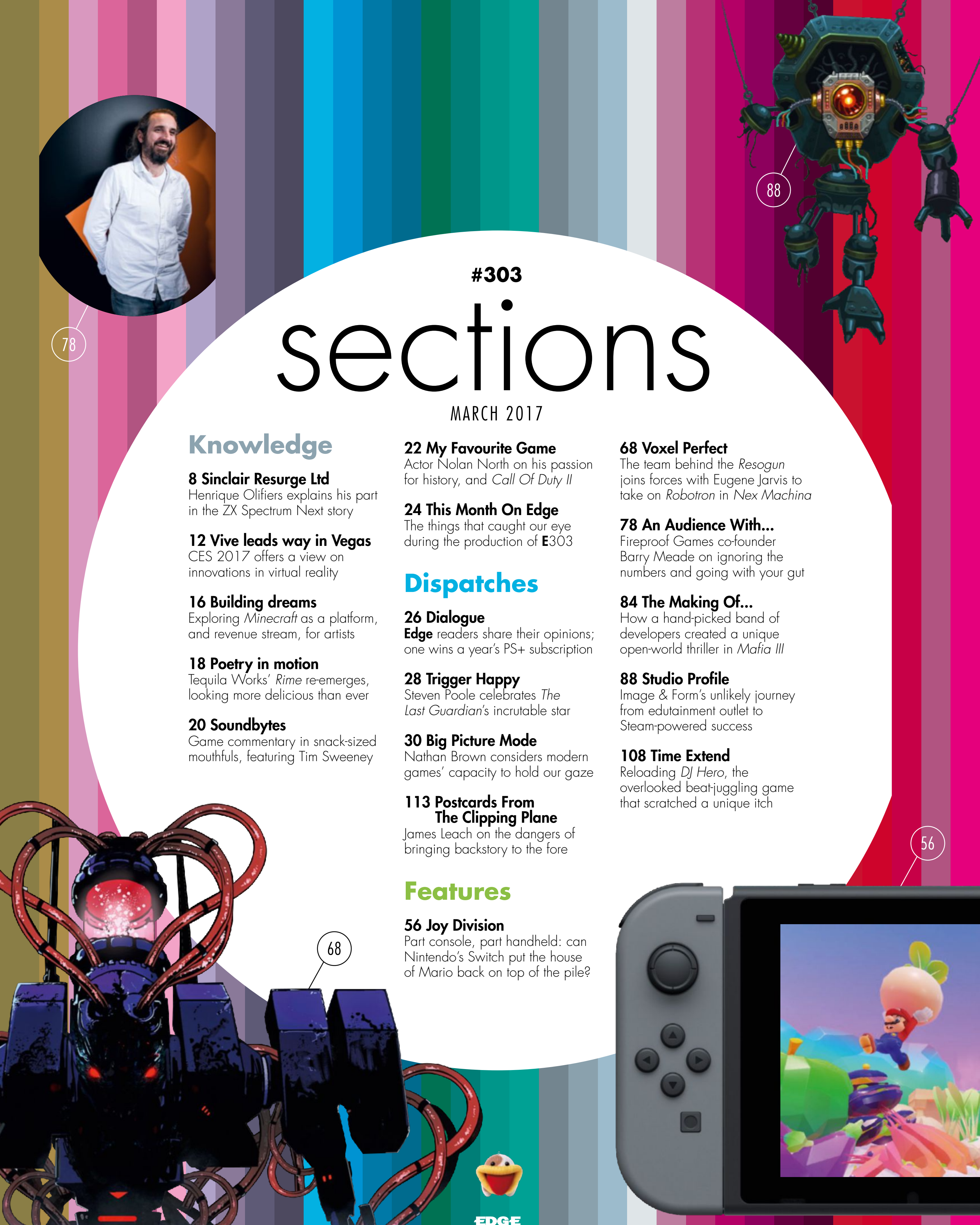


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MARCH 2017



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The ZX Spectrum is back – and there's no need to dig out your tape recorder

Have you ever wondered what inspires Bossa Studios to dream up oddball games such as *I Am Bread*? Look no further than gamer-in-chief **Henrique Olifiers**, who had his childhood mind scrambled by eccentric ZX Spectrum games such as *Jet Set Willy*.

"Thirty years ago, I was playing a game where the whole house was trying to kill me and I end up with my head inside a toilet," he says. "Why don't we make games like that any more? Why so serious?" Hence Olifiers' affectionate and ambitious plan to revive Sinclair's long-dormant computer range with a 2017 model – the fully licensed ZX Spectrum Next, complete with design work from original Sinclair designer Rick Dickinson.

The Next board is an evolution of the TBBlue, a Raspberry Pi-esque Spectrum-in-a-box built by Victor Trucco – a veteran retro engineer who's also a childhood friend of Olifiers. Trucco planned to sell the TBBlue outside of his native Brazil, but Olifiers dreamed bigger. "I started to push it," the Bossa man explains. "Why don't we add more memory, more graphics modes? I reached out to Rick Dickinson, and he was in. Lo and behold, we had the Next."

There's no software emulator here, nor a desire to mimic the game-jukebox approach of 2015's Spectrum Vega. Next's hardware perfectly simulates Sinclair's chips down to the microsecond, so it's compatible with everything from *Jet Set Willy* to a 2015 homebrew version of *Castlevania*, and has ports for cassette recorders and Sinclair joysticks. It even plays the 1987 conversion of Taito's *Arkanoid* – a tester's nightmare because of some esoteric graphics coding. "That game is crazy," Olifiers says. "If *Arkanoid* works, chances are everything else will."

Olifiers, Trucco and collaborator Fabio Belavenuto have considerably beefed up the new hardware's specs since they started work – as well as the price and lead time. "I'm way behind schedule!" Olifiers admits. But that's given breathing room for wider collaboration. Enthusiasts and '80s coding stars, including *Midnight Resistance* maestro Jim Bagley, have been influencing – or directly coding – new features, and shaping the hardware into something far beyond similar hobbyist projects, such as Spain's ZX Uno.

An adjustable CPU speed means that many old titles (including *Elite*, an Olifiers favourite) will run at higher framerates, while games such as *Cybernoid* have already been recoloured to show off HDMI output and a quadrupled colour palette. "We're now talking about removing colour clash," says Olifiers



The Next case took original Sinclair industrial designer Rick Dickinson three months to perfect. The only mystery is those rainbow stripes: right now, it's unclear if they'll be illuminated by LEDs, or simply decorative



Henrique Olifiers, co-founder and gamer-in-chief of London's Bossa Studios, and manager of the ZX Spectrum Next project

of the notorious colour-bleeding issue that saw many games for the platform plump for drab monochrome instead. "*No one* is fighting to keep colour clash."

Olifiers can't grant the wide-eyed wishes of every grown-up '80s child. Extra features have already bumped the new Spectrum's pricetag up to around £175 – the same as 1982 consumers paid at launch for the 48K version of the original model. But he's been nothing but open with both fans and detractors throughout. "It's such a small community and so passionate," he says. "It's very easy to get on their bad side. I'm very careful with that."

It's the community that really excites Olifiers: he's eager to watch what people do with a new 1980s-era programming box that's ready for experimentation from the second it's turned on. "With Raspberry Pi, you have to struggle with whatever operating system you install. That's very different to what we had back in the day: you could immediately start digging in to see what made the machine tick, because it was so much more simple and exposed."

Veteran Z80 coders and demoscene types (the latter surprisingly prolific in Russia) are already fired up about the ramped-up audio, WiFi, and 96 times as much RAM as the debut 16K Spectrum. An added 'accelerator' – an onboard Raspberry Pi – can process 3D graphics and pipe them directly to the Spectrum's display, so it's entirely possible for the Next hardware to run, say, *Quake* rendered down to a resolution of 256x192. (Thanks to the machine's double SD card slots, there would be no need to wait the 15 hours *Quake* would take to load from cassette tape.)

Other Spectrum revivals have exhumed the 'dead flesh' rubber keys of the original model, but Dickinson's design is a return to 1984's Spectrum+. "Rubber was out immediately," Olifiers says. "But we didn't want anything that looked like a Commodore, so a traditional keyboard was out as well. We started talking about the Spectrum+ keyboard – but reengineered, because [the 1984 version] looked great but felt terrible." A new approach means that underneath the keys are modern-day laptop switches that avoid the notoriously sticky, wobbly feel of the originals.







The ULAPlus – a reengineered version of the Spectrum's original display chip – boosts onscreen colours from 15 to 64. If rubber keys are your thing, the new silicon can be fitted inside of an original ZX Spectrum case

The casing design is clever all round, the curve on the right side slyly echoing the moulded metal faceplate of the original Spectrum. But if neither the white nor black ZX Spectrum Next appeals to you, the board is sized so that you can scoop the innards out of an old Spectrum and slide the new tech snugly inside.

But for Olifiers to afford the pricey moulds that would make the case a reality, he has a Kickstarter goal to meet. He estimates he needs 2,500 backers kicking in for the £175 machine – aiming at 40-somethings with nostalgia in their hearts and a Z80 programming manual in their attic. If he undershoots, the fancy case remains on Dickinson's drawing board.

But there's little risk of backers experiencing the bumpy ride of similarly themed Kickstarter projects, such as Elite's Recreated ZX Spectrum, which ran into various problems. Olifiers has already spent £10,000 of his own money prototyping up to a ready-to-ship board. "The Next exists," he says confidently. "I have the luxury of eliminating the risk around crowdsourcing."

Olifiers is the perfect cheerleader for this new computer. He's still the Spectrum-obsessed kid from Brazil, albeit now with a 48K Spectrum framed on his living-room wall and a fear of ever meeting Sir Clive Sinclair in case he can't live up to "the mystical figure in my head". The Next firmware is open source, in a deliberate attempt to let the machine "take on a life of its own". This isn't a business proposition for Olifiers – it's a way to write a new chapter of the ZX Spectrum story.

This isn't a business proposition for Olifiers – it's a way to write a new chapter of the ZX Spectrum story

"It's about giving something back to something that gave so much to us," he says. "I spent all my pocket money on Your Sinclair and Crash magazines, and I wanted to be a part of that crowd. But I was a kid in another country, so I couldn't be. Now, perhaps, I can." ■

The Vive Tracker hardware will be launched in Q2, but HTC has yet to announce the unit's official price



Vive leads the way in Vegas

Where are the innovations happening in VR right now? CES 2017 held some answers

The 12 months of 2016 saw virtual reality emerge as a consumer technology to take seriously, giving us HTC's Vive, Oculus's Rift (and subsequently its Touch controllers), and Sony's PlayStation VR. But despite these devices' many innovations, we've always known that they represent just the first steps on the road towards VR's emergence as a must-have lifestyle choice for everyone rather than a plaything for hobbyists and the curious. In five years' time, the VR landscape will have changed entirely. For now, we're taking baby steps – and CES 2017 was the venue at which to witness the incremental progress firsthand.

More than 100,000 enthusiasts converged on Las Vegas for this year's CES, where VR was bidding for attention against a galaxy of new OLED TVs from every major player in the market. Though VR's presence was reduced in comparison to 2016's CES, there was nonetheless plenty to dig into if you knew where to look, including HTC's Vive Tracker, a selection of intriguing VR games, and the technology we're going to need to finally cut the annoying cable tethering our headsets to our PCs.



HTC's Deluxe Audio Strap also made its debut at CES, offering embedded audio and improved comfort over the standard unit

The best VR-related goings-on weren't happening on the showfloor; if you wanted to see one potential future for the technology, you had to check out HTC's private suite, where its demos showed how its Vive Tracker allows you to bring ▶

The Tracker hardware isn't fussy about how you attach it to an object: its relative orientation just needs to be factored on the software side





Tracker demos saw the unit attached to a variety of objects – guns were obvious choices, but one option saw the unit applied to the wrist and used with a VR glove



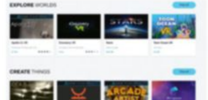


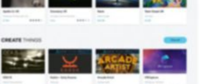


HTC's Daniel O'Brien (left) is keen to emphasise that Vive content is flowing at full steam, even if CES as a whole was light on titles that demonstrate the progress being made in VR gaming

LIKE AND SUBSCRIBE

HTC is cooking up a new way to buy Vive applications





HTC used CES 2017 to promote a new subscription plan that it intends to launch in Q2, offering a steady stream of Vive-compatible content – games, movies and applications – for a set price. Interestingly, the games and apps will be delivered via Viveport, HTC's firstparty app store, rather than through Steam, which will no doubt present an annoyance for PC owners accustomed to keeping all of their content in one place. HTC hasn't yet revealed how much a subscription will cost, but it's following the established model of offering a free trial, with signups now open at www.viveport.com.

any object into a virtual world. The theory is straightforward: if you want to play, say, a game of baseball in virtual reality, instead of using Vive's angular motion controllers, you can attach a Vive Tracker to the end of a real-life bat, and the Vive hardware's sensor array can track it appropriately. Another example sees a Bluetooth-enabled gun controller in place of the standard Vive controller; just strap the Tracker on top or on the muzzle, and you're ready to go.

Using real-world objects that have comparable weights to the ones you're seeing in VR is intended to add to the user's sense of immersion and dampen the feelings of disassociation that some people feel when they first step into VR. There are limitations, however. First, developers must create software that reproduces the appropriate object, since the Tracker hardware clearly cannot detect what it's attached to. Second, the hardware is to be an optional peripheral rather than a standard part of the Vive setup, so if you're about to take the plunge with HTC's vision for VR, be prepared to shell out extra.

A number of CES demos illustrated why you might be happy to make the investment, from a one-of-a-kind multiplayer firstperson shooter that combined a smartphone and a Tracker, to a firefighting simulator that teaches the basics of the profession using a haptic-feedback-enabled firehose. The demos were short, much like the examples that were used to demo Vive on its debut, but nevertheless convincing, and point to all sorts of applications where developers might implement Tracker technology down the road.

HTC's other big VR-focused announcement at CES involved TPCast, the Chinese company working on a solution that enables the Vive headset to operate wirelessly: apparently the hardware will be ready to ship worldwide in the first half of this year. CES chatter surrounding wireless (non-mobile-powered) VR was a mix of excitement and scepticism. The advantages are clear, but neither HTC nor Oculus is offering its own solutions, and relying on thirdparty support for such key elements hardly inspires confidence.



TPCast's Wireless Adapter will be expensive when it arrives in Q2, but it addresses an issue that is particularly significant with Vive, whose room-scale approach to VR encourages users to move around

TPCast's Wireless Adapter works by plugging into the control pack that sits on the Vive's top strap; a wireless receiver then plugs into your PC. TPCast says that you should be able to escape to the virtual world sans cord for up to 120 minutes on a single battery charge, although a higher-capacity battery, offering up to five hours of charge, will also be available. HTC and TPCast claim that, despite being wireless, lag isn't an issue, and our short demo holds up well. We'll need to spend extensive time with the final hardware to fully assess its capabilities; certainly it'll have to deliver to justify its proposed $250 pricetag.

> There's no escaping the demand for hardware to be made lighter, less bulky, and more convenient

In terms of new VR software, not many of the game industry's biggest players turned up to CES, but there were both mainstream and indie titles to sample if you knew where to look. Sony showed off a new demo of *Farpoint*, its Aim Controller-optimised sci-fi shooter, while HTC hosted demos of Ubisoft's *Star Trek: Bridge Commander*, seeing you and four friends at the helm of the Enterprise. On the indie side, futuristic racquetball game *Racket: NX* stood out on Vive, while adult film studio Naughty America peddled its own particular brand of wares in a room just off the main showfloor.

Some observers may have found the lack of new VR games at CES cause for concern – a sign, perhaps, that developers are failing to maintain their early pace. Having delivered their first wave of titles in 2016, many of them are now in the production stages of their follow-up works but are not yet ready to show them in public. Daniel O'Brien, general manager of Vive at HTC, was quick to point out that over 30 new pieces of Vive content are arriving per week, although 'content' is a broad term. Having launched later than Vive and Rift, PlayStation VR is not keeping pace with its competitors in terms of releases, but its superior installed base will ensure that it receives a steady flow of conversions to go with the exclusives that Sony is actively signing for the platform.

In terms of the longer-term picture for VR, there's no escaping the continued demand among mainstream consumers for hardware to be made lighter, less bulky, and more convenient. CES provided a response to one of those requests, at least. A small amount of progress is clearly preferable to stagnation. Is it reasonable to expect more innovations at E3 in June? ■

Building dreams

Minecraft is a brilliant platform for having fun, but what about its potential as a launchpad for artists?

Minecraft's eight-year history is studded with extraordinary moments. First, in initial dev videos, it stole attention as an infinite procedurally generated world of blocks. Later, players shared their experiences of it as a game about crafting a shelter to survive a night of zombies. Then, as it started to take off in popularity, players began to explore it as a solo and collaborative construction tool, a game about building things. When in 2010 videos began to pop up showing vast projects, such as a full-scale USS Enterprise and a fully functional CPU, it became clear that *Minecraft* was more than just a plaything or a game. It was becoming a creative medium in itself.

Since then, a generation of 3D artists has grown and developed an industry making things, places and spaces in *Minecraft*, 3D maps known in the community as builds. Their canvas is *Minecraft*'s practically infinite space, their materials the textures and shapes of its blocks.

> "Very few have heard of the creative possibilities or even the work opportunities"

Marceau Nakayama is one of those artists, having created a series of builds which express some of the breadth of what *Minecraft* makes possible. His Triangular Ascension 2.0 – Cyberpunk Hangar is a vast and cavernous space hangar that uses light-emitting and glass blocks to create an atmosphere of hard light and volume, while the more grounded Kite City & The Burning Sands (see facing page) shows a settlement of wooden posts and cloth sheets perched on rocks in a desert.

"Like many, I started *Minecraft* because it reminded me of my childhood when I was playing with Lego," explains Nakayama, who's known as Udvio on the premier builder-community site Planet Minecraft. "It felt the same experience with *Minecraft*: endless possibilities."

Born in Tokyo, he also lived in South America before settling in Paris, and though he's always been attracted to the visual arts, he didn't go to art school, training to become a professional chef instead. But he really wants to be a concept artist for games and movies.

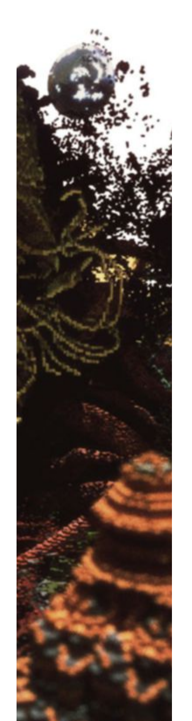
While he also draws and paints textured and atmospheric semi-abstracts in oils and acrylics, there's a sense that *Minecraft* has given him a chance to develop and express his visual side. "*Minecraft* helped me realise how much I enjoy creating things no matter what medium I use," Nakayama says. "Until recently I focused more on non-playable scale projects where the only purpose was to make a 3D model as if it were just like another 3D program."

He uses *Minecraft* a little like a Photoshop for 3D space, but doesn't work block-by-block, in the way you would in Creative Mode with a vanilla install. Over the years, many plugins and mods have been created to help with building from within the game, such as WorldEdit and VoxelSniper. These tools allow builders to quickly construct volumes of terrain to specific specifications of block type and shape, sculpt them with brushes, and copy and paste sections. That none of Nakayama's work is imported from external 3D editors is a point of pride.

Along with the tools, *Minecraft*'s builder community has developed greatly since the early days, and it's motivated by rather more than passion. Nakayama belongs to one of its principal groups – a company in its own right, in fact – called BlockWorks. Founded in 2012 by James Delaney, who is currently studying architecture at Cambridge, BlockWorks is a collective of 130 builders who make commercial projects in *Minecraft* for savvy clients, including Microsoft, UN-Habitat and the Museum Of London.



***Minecraft* artist Marceau Nakayama**



But in the wider creative industry, it's still a mystery that people are making things of note in *Minecraft*. "Very few have heard of the creative possibilities or even the work opportunities," Nakayama says. And yet *Minecraft* has matured as both a game and a community. Today, its veterans have been building for five years, and Nakayama considers himself a newbie, having only started two years ago. "I feel I've arrived late to the party. Two years ago, the very classic mega-builders of big fantasy castles were already leaving."

Whether they're being replaced by a newer generation isn't entirely clear. Nakayama feels that many younger builders are more motivated by money rather than exploring *Minecraft* as a creative medium. "Many of them like to call themselves 'professional builders' and exclusively produce basic lobbies and spawn maps for servers," he says.

"I think that many of the people I've met are slowly growing up and heading towards their career choices; some become architecture or design students," Nakayama continues. "We all met in *Minecraft* and shared a common passion. It's sad to see a lot of people leave the community, but I'm also happy we all found our paths and I like to think *Minecraft* helped us to define a bit more what we are truly passionate about." ■



Kite City & The Burning Sands is a *Guild Wars*-inspired build. Nakayama says the huts hang on the rocks to catch the breeze and avoid sandstorms



POETRY IN MOTION

Tequila Works' adventure re-emerges, looking even more delicious than before

Following *Rime*'s initial reveal (and our cover story in **E**273), Tequila Works fell suspiciously quiet about its promising-looking adventure, breaking cover only to announce a collaboration with Cavalier Game Studios for *The Sexy Brutale*. Now the game, which was previously a PS4 exclusive, has been re-revealed as a multiformat title, with Switch, PC and Xbox One versions also lined up. And it looks to be in fine fettle.

"In all honesty, the game was announced very early on in its development," Tequila Works CEO and creative director **Raúl Rubio** tells us. "We decided to keep quiet while we were working on the game because there were always things changing. And when we got back the IP rights and decided to publish with Grey Box, both parties agreed that we wanted to re-reveal when we were close to release, so that we could be substantive in our information."

Tequila has put its time to good use, tweaking level design and fine-tuning the world to make it feel more cohesive, and more alive.

"Some of the early puzzles you saw have been tweaked to better integrate them within the world, and to be both more logical and fun," Rubio says. "And we've done a lot to flesh out the narrative. It's always tricky to try to tell a story without any dialogue or exposition, and so we've provided subtle cues in the environments, and make the emotions and interactions of the boy and other characters more fulfilling."

The studio's progress exacerbates *Rime*'s early comparisons to Fumito Ueda's work, but it also evokes aspects of *The Witness*, *Journey* and even *Zelda*. We'll have to wait until May to find out if these elements cohere into something special, but the visual aspect, at least, seems certain to deliver. ■



Ico's influence can be felt in some of the game's architecture and camera angles, but not in a way that damages *Rime*'s visual appeal

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I'll fund any idea that I think is dope... My current obsession is 3D-printing all the *Five Nights At Freddy's* characters for my daughter."

We're not sure we follow, **T-Pain** – but could you just run us off a Trico while you're at it?



"We'll recreate humans. You'll be able to see anyone, doing their natural motions, wherever they are. Do anything but touch them. We're going to have teleportation with this technology."

Epic's **Tim Sweeney** inches a step closer to the Holodeck



"We really neglected our community during the development of *Banner Saga 2*, because we were focusing on our work. **We all agree that was a mistake."**

Perhaps, Stoic founder **John Watson**, a PR agency that agreed to preview requests might also have helped

"The game I played the most was the **'I've got a C64 and I wish I had an Amiga'** game. I played that every second of my life."

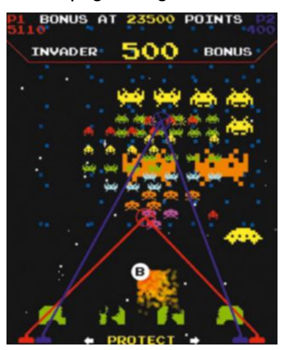


Gage Skidmore

Silicon Valley's **Kumail Nanjiani** recalls a childhood of being deceived by screenshots

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Space Invaders Frenzy
Manufacturer Raw Thrills

For the Taito-licensed *Space Invaders Frenzy*, Raw Thrills has partnered its towering eight-foot *World's Largest Pac-Man* screen with an unlikely set of components: the control panel, guns and chairs from its *Jurassic Park Arcade* lightgun game. This fundamental change to the classic *Space Invaders* setup means you also no longer move your laser base back and forth beneath the encroaching alien forces; instead you have two bases at opposite sides of the screen from which lasers converge on whichever section of the screen you point your sights. This infuses the game with a dash of *Missile Command* – underscored by the bouncing meteors that come into play.

While your bases are static, there's still a row of destructible shields across the bottom of the screen, if only to evoke the classic setup. As with *World's Largest Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders Frenzy* has videmption and amusement modes, is festooned with LEDs (65,000, in fact), and can be played by one or two players. Each seat also contains a subwoofer, for that authentic throbbing invader vibe.



My Favourite Game
Nolan North

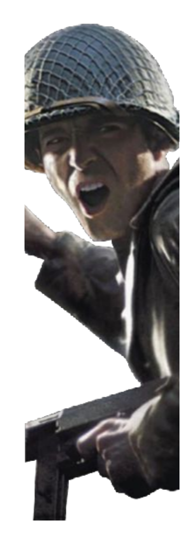
The voice of Nathan Drake on being a history buff, pulling all-nighters, and pretending to be Lionel Messi

Nolan North is an award-winning screen and voice actor with a vast list of videogames on his CV, including, famously, the *Uncharted* series. That role landed him a part in Star Trek Into Darkness, directed by JJ Abrams, a fan of Naughty Dog's work. North's most recent role, however, is that of a producer for *Con Man*, the iOS game based on Alan Tudyk's comedy series.

Do you remember the first time you heard a human voice in a game?
It's funny because people usually ask me, "Did you always want to do voices for videogames?" And I say, "Of course I didn't, because there never were voices in videogames." I don't remember the first human voice I heard in games. But I do remember one of the early games I did was *Call Of Duty 2*. I'm a history buff, and I love reading about WWII, and in *COD* I played Sergeant Randal. He's nobody special. You meet him when you land on Omaha Beach in Normandy – y'know: "Follow me this way!", "Get to the hedgerow!" That kind of thing.

Do you manage to play all of the games that feature your voice work?
It's not a prerequisite in my life; it's not a high priority. I usually get them and let my kids review them first. Of course I checked out *Uncharted*, but I just want to play the game – I'm not really critiquing my performance or anything, because, hell, it's too late by then! I remember the first time I came to London, a police constable from up north who was in his 40s came to see me. He said, "I took the train four hours to meet you. Every day I get up, take my tea, go to work and nothing ever happens, but at night I get to go and travel the world as Nathan Drake." He said, "I'll never go anywhere, I'll never see places, but you've provided this experience for me and I wanted to thank you." I was dumbfounded, but I went back and talked to Richard Lemarchand, because they're geniuses with what they can do. They *mapped my face* for *Uncharted 4*. Every wrinkle is mine, just over his bone structure. *That's my face*, for god's sakes. It's amazing what can be done. So while I'm not a gamer as such, I am a big lover of the game industry, and I just think it's really interesting how they make them, and I've always been that way.

GREAT'S DECEPTION
Beyond Nathan Drake, Nolan North has played a remarkable number of roles in games, including The Penguin in *Batman: Arkham Origins*, protagonist of the *Assassin's Creed* series Desmond Miles, and *Titanfall*'s Hammond. He also replaced Peter Dinklage as Ghost in *Destiny*. As a producer, North recently helped to shape Monkey Strength's iOS management sim *Con Man*, in which you build and maintain a fan convention.



> "They *mapped my face*. Every wrinkle is mine, just over his bone structure. *That's my face*, for god's sakes"

Is that why you agreed to help produce *Con Man*?
That's one of the reasons. It's been so exciting to have input on stuff like character sketches, to meet the devs, sit in a boardroom and act like an actual adult – I mean, most of my life I spend just playing, which is what I'm best at! It's been rewarding, and exhausting, but we're very proud of what we did.

Are you excited about the prospect of performing in VR?
I got to try PSVR recently. I played *London Heist*, and that was probably a performance-captured gig, and the technology is always going to get better. I think it's astounding. The only drawback I see is that you look like a complete idiot wearing it [laughs].

Was Star Trek the first time that a game role landed you a film part?
Star Trek was a huge deal – JJ Abrams is a big fan and he just thought it would be cool to have me in the film. Unfortunately my role got whittled down through production to one line [laughs]. But it was just so much fun to put on that uniform and be part of that world. I mean, they *built a spaceship*. But I think his endorsement is a sign that gaming is a big deal to a lot of people now.

How do your kids react to their dad featuring in so many games?
Ah, I'm just Dad – they don't give a shit [laughs]. One of the best compliments my son ever gave me, he said, "It's a really good game. I kinda forget it's you."

They were into *FIFA* for a while – I was telling them I did the voice of Messi. And then they play it and point out that he doesn't say anything, so I'm like, "Oh, no, I did all the running." This was when they were younger. Now they know I'm full of shit.

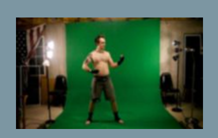
What's your favourite game?
It would be *COD2*. My wife walked in while I was playing, looked at me and said, "What the hell are you doing?" And I go, "What?" She says, "It's 3:30 in the morning." I'd played for nine hours. My eyes were dry. But I was *there*. I'd seen those scenes in movies, but now I was running through it. It was the first time I ever really got lost in a game. ■



Nolan North started out as a journalist, but moved to New York in order to focus on acting, working in a selection of TV roles before lending his talents to the world of games

WEBSITE
GOP Arcade
bit.ly/goparcade

GOP Arcade attempts to skewer American politics with this collection of browser microgames themed on Donald Trump's campaign, victory and inauguration. Some are forgettable – *Trump's Pussy Grabber*, for example, is just *Whack A Mole* with cats and a disturbing soundtrack. But others are more successful: *The Voter Suppression Trail* takes a wry look at the obstacles to voting faced by minority groups; *Thoughts & Prayers* challenges you to stop mass shootings using only the titular tools; while *Bomb The Right Place* satirises America's foreign policy, military interventions and ego. None of this will lead to political reform, of course, and Trump's still – please hold us – the president of the USA, but at least we can all have a little fun as the clock ticks towards the world being turned to ash.

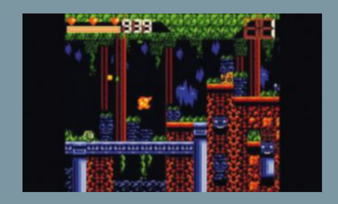


VIDEO
Surviving Indie
bit.ly/survivingindie

Directed by Pixel Poetry creator Richard James Cook, Surviving Indie is a sobering exploration of the struggles faced by indie developers in an increasingly crowded game industry. The film charts Cook's own difficulties as he works on *Super Combat Fighter*, and he candidly discusses the frustration of rejection, absent funds and the time he lost his apartment as a result of financial hardship, as well as interviewing other indie devs. While occasionally difficult viewing, in challenging the romanticised world of indie development Cook has created essential viewing for anyone trying to break into the scene.

WEB GAME
Cancelled Refuge
bit.ly/cancelledrefuge

Cancelled Refuge, the winning Ludum Dare 37 entry from Sinclair Strange, is a diminutive marvel. Styling his work as an old 8bit platformer, Strange plays a little loose with the competition's 'One Room' theme to create an unexpectedly deep game. *Cancelled Refuge* actually offers up three rooms, but tackling any of them means repeating your journey from one side to the other over and over again. Each time you make it to the exit you score a 'Loop', and on the next run subtle changes will make things harder: enemies appear and increase in number, platforms get in the way, and environmental hazards crop up. You can take on these looping gauntlets with one of five characters, and the smart design plays familiarity and surprise off against each other to dazzling effect.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

MEDIA STREAMER
Shield TV
bit.ly/newshieldtv

Nvidia's first Android-powered TV box was the most powerful device of its kind on the market, and the GPU specialist has extended its lead over the competition with this new revision. Forty per cent smaller than its predecessor, the system's headline additions are HDR support and, finally, Amazon Video, which was unavailable on the original Shield TV thanks to Amazon's ongoing bunfight with Google. Elsewhere, support for Google Assistant and Nvidia's own Spot tech positions Shield TV as a smart-home hub, while its game library continues to grow, with the GeForce Now streaming service now offering new Ubisoft games on their launch days. The best media streamer on shelves just got even better, then.





continue

Fast cash
Awesome Games Done Quick raises $2.2m for cancer prevention

Dreams don't die
Swery quits retirement a few months in to found White Owls Inc

Watch the game
Will the Starcade reboot be awful? Probably. But we still want to see it

Dishonoured
Capcom punishes *SFV* rage-quitters with a badge on their profile

quit

Derig
Sony rewards Guerrilla Cambridge's efforts with mass redundancy

Debit hard
A Switch for £270? Sure. But do we pay the rent, or get spare Joy-Cons?

Pass the pad
Watching our kids beat games fills us with pride, but isn't it bedtime now?

Child's play
As for toddlers in *The Sims 4*: we have enough of those already, thanks

TWEETS

I'll work extra hard to never have to let you down like this again, so I hope you will keep watching over us in the future too.
Hideki Kamiya @PG_kamiya
Game director, *Scalebound*

QA seems pointless to me. If you ever need to discover every existing bug in your game, just try to make a trailer.
Tom Francis @HeatSig
Heat Signature developer

If we are living in a simulation, pretty sure someone recently installed user mods.
Sam Barlow mrsambarlow
Writer and designer, *Her Story*

If only there were some way I could walk around my *NMS* planets whilst wearing the smelly giraffe suit out of *Steep* I'd be videogame complete.
Jeff Minter @llamasoft_ox
Founder, Llamasoft





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DISPATCHES
MARCH



Issue 302

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation Plus

Nomad

A few years ago, I went to both California and New York for the first time. When I arrived I felt a remarkable sense of familiarity, despite being in places that should have felt totally alien.

It wasn't just the recognition of famous landmarks – I'd been to Paris and Milan the same year, and didn't get the same feeling at all. I realised that the reason I felt as though I'd been there before was because I *had* been to those places. I'd explored the concrete playground of Liberty City in *GTAIV* and the hazy landscape of the West coast in *Red Dead Redemption* from the comfort of my living room.

I might not have noticed it at the time of playing them, but these games had managed to evoke a sense of place far more than cinema or literature ever could. That's because I actually felt like I experienced those environments, memories which came flooding back once I set foot there for real. Rockstar had made multi-sensory locations that I could explore in a way that's unique to gaming, and breathe in everything from the soundscape to the pace of life.

> "It was only after finishing the campaign that the full force of those horrors really hit me"

I recently completed *Battlefield 1* and was struck by a similar effect. Although I'd read books and watched films about World War I, perhaps shamefully it was only after finishing the campaign in DICE's latest blockbuster that the full force of those horrors really hit me. I hadn't learnt anything new, but something about the experience of playing the game meant that I was almost moved to tears as I tried to comprehend the utter devastation and sorrow that those poor men had to suffer a century ago.

I think the industry has reached a level of graphical and thematic maturity that makes agency matter much more than it used to. There's a new opportunity for game designers to craft experiences that echo real-life places and events in more meaningful ways than ever before. So maybe it won't be David Cage that finally makes the first game to make us cry, but a playable Siegfried Sassoon poem instead.
Joel Windels

At the moment we want to *escape* the abominations that manifest themselves outside of our windows every day, not evoke them when we're trying to be entertained. Even New Donk City has us yearning for the Mushroom Kingdom right now.

The prodigy

Lately, I have become wildly out of touch with gaming. I have a huge backlog of games, I've become jaded with release prices and DLC schedules, and I'm ten issues behind with **Edge** (sorry about that). I have resorted to snippets of *Destiny* and slowly crawling my Light level up, which is now at 388. As is common among the letters on this page, however, my lack of gaming time can be attributed to one thing: the arrival of my first child, a beautiful girl, last year. Raising a child sounds like the antithesis of gaming, and that is mostly what I read in these pages, but I don't think that is the case. All gaming folk should be well prepared for the task.

For a start, babies are released unfinished. They will have bugs well into their first few months, will require constant additions in that period and they lack many features that they will eventually gain (I'd complain to the developer, but that seems ungrateful). Then there is the initial grind: changing nappies and clothes, mopping things up, the constant repetition for minimal results that just has to be done in order to even get to Level 1, which takes a whole year. Any RPG player can relate.

But then you get into the core of the task, and it becomes addictive. New skills are added on a regular basis that change all the



dimensions: crawling, giggling, teeth. The level of interactivity increases and the future schedule seems tantalising. My girl has just started crawling, but eventually she will walk, then talk, then start throwing things around and maybe one day become a tennis player. The potential is huge.

So as she crawls along, reaches for a squishy animal and manages to grab it, I can see the task for the simple patrol mission that it is: a small step, but another step towards bigger, better things. One day she will do the raid.
Ambrus Veres

Sure, sure. You will get in touch again once your daughter starts teething, won't you?

Black box

Well, there it is. Before the conference, I was all in. I wanted Nintendo's full force behind it. Indies to flock to it just as they've done with PS4. I wasn't expecting a force of major thirdparty developers, but at this point, it looks like the Wii U will have had more support. And that's saying something. I wanted the Switch to be my main gaming system. I was content with leaving my PS4 just for exclusives. Now, I'm thinking of upgrading to a PS4 Pro with the cash I've saved up and maybe picking up a 2DS-style barebones version of Switch that actually comes with the good controller down the line someday, on the cheap.

I honestly am still reeling from the disappointment I felt after watching that conference. I can't believe just how deflated I am about Switch. There is just a profound sadness hanging in the air. At least Wii U games should be getting cheaper soon…
Ben McManus

If it helps, you're just one of many to write in to share Switch-related woes. We suspect, though, that the most disappointed among us are only so down because we're all going to buy it at launch anyway, whatever the cost. There's your Nintendo difference.

Foul play

I can't be the only one who thinks that, as an industry, we're getting ever closer to the end of conventional press conferences as we know them. Hardware and software announcements aside, if the Switch reveal event proved anything, it's that the concept of an unrelatable businessman spewing facts, figures and intentions simply doesn't make for an interesting watch. Especially when you consider the latter, and the fact that some titles these days aren't in fact fortunate enough to ever grace our screens (RIP *Scalebound*). Going forward we need to establish an alternative method.

Metaphorically walking into the Nintendo event I was hoping to experience a fun and poppy show akin to the excellent display PlayStation is able to deliver audiences every year with PSX. Instead what we got was a very dimly lit and unenthusiastic display with some very vibrant trailers in between, which made for an awkward shift in tone. Granted, there were language barriers this time around and technological workarounds needed to solve them, but c'mon, the big three need to ask themselves who's more important: shareholders or fans?
Aaron Potter

You probably shouldn't ask the question, because you won't like the answer. Sony's 'For The Players' line has served it well this generation, but it didn't help the employees of Guerrilla Cambridge, closed now because it didn't show enough profit potential.

The shamen

In a letter in **E**302, Leo Tarasov speculated that we cannot, in fact, be living in a simulation because there aren't enough glitches. Specifically, he cited the dumb behaviour of non-player characters in games; guards that ignore gushing wounds, for example, or *Grand Theft Auto* pedestrians that calmly stand in the path of oncoming juggernauts before becoming an oblivious, scarlet paste.

Surely, Tarasov argues, if we were living in a Matrix-style facsimile, we'd see ridiculous behaviour from non-player characters and logical glitches all the time as the system strains to generate a believable reality.

Well, in a year that brought Brexit and Trump, it's pretty obvious that everyone has been making stupid, illogical decisions left and right, without the slightest regard for their own wellbeing.

It's not just NPCs acting stupid, either. Consider the law enforcement in most games; if you bump into a passer-by in *Red Dead Redemption*, the sheriff will hunt you to the ends of the earth, but the same sheriff won't bat an eyelid if you ritually slaughter a prostitute in the town square. In my old saved game of *Skyrim*, there's a city where the guards are still after my head because I tried to intervene in a mugging in 2012.

Do draconian law-enforcement techniques, implemented with little provocation, and a callous disregard for the rights of women in general and sex workers in particular sound familiar to anyone else? I'm beginning to suspect that the glitches in our Matrix are evident, just slightly more subtle than we'd been expecting.

I'm not saying that this proves I'm the protagonist of some vast, intergalactic version of *The Sims*, you understand. But it's looking increasingly likely. Especially if my letter gets printed.
Luke Haines

OK, now we're just scared. Did we really decide to award you a year's free PlayStation Plus subscription, or were we guided by some higher power? Either way, it's yours.

Snap

Why in Hype does the origin of the games get recorded, but you don't show the information in Play?
Richard Stratton

You'll be wanting cheat POKEs with your reviews next. (Ask an elderly relative.) ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

So here it is, finally. Great artists say that a work is never finished, only abandoned, and you might think that is clearly true of *The Last Guardian*. But what an experience it is, dealing with something that has a mind of its own and never quite does what you want it to. And I'm just talking about the camera.

It hardly matters, though, because spending time with Trico makes it clear that this is a stunning landmark in the artform. I'm surprised by people who call the beast a "bird-dog", because for anyone who grew up with cats, the feline personality is overpowering. Any cat owner will sometimes wonder whether the cat really likes her or just sees her as a convenient supplier of food. A cat will sometimes turn up its nose at a perfectly good plate of Whiskas, just as Trico occasionally refuses to munch on a barrel. And just as the most domesticated cat still has an irreducible core of wildness about it, so *The Last Guardian* constantly reminds you that Trico is not a pet but a fearsome wild beast, notorious as a man-eater, with whom you exist in what might be nothing more than an alliance of convenience. The star of the game is perfectly emblematic of the Romantic category of the sublime: something elementally both beautiful and terrifying.

At a deeper level, the game pulls really fascinatingly in two ways at our expectations of the medium, and in particular our expectations of how an NPC companion should behave. We are used to ordering about computer-controlled squad members in a tactical shooter, and in general they obey orders (when they aren't repeatedly crouching and standing up, or getting stuck in doorways). Indeed in general we tend to think of part of the pleasure of videogames as that of predictable control of a rational system, where actions have reliable, immediate, and logical consequences, as they so often don't in real life. And then along comes this game about an obstreperous animal, a game about how you can't always get what you want.

Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**



Exploring Ueda's beautiful world with Trico is at times like being in an emotionally abusive relationship

This can make *The Last Guardian* frustrating as a videogame, because we normally experience robust chains of cause and effect in gameworlds. But that is only because, deep down, we are sure that they are just lifeless mechanical systems. The breaking of the reliable link between cause and effect is a key part of what, in this game, creates the extraordinary illusion of life. And Ueda's genius has been to make an illusion that is not an exclusively pretty one. Exploring Ueda's beautiful world with Trico is at times like being in an emotionally abusive relationship. You try to read the creature's face for signs of a mood change; you walk on eggshells lest you trigger an outburst; you pet and soothe because your very life might depend on it.

In its depiction of a fundamentally ungovernable lifeform, then, *The Last Guardian* implicitly dramatises society's current nervousness about the unintended consequences of some future artificial-intelligence explosion. Serious philosophers such as Nick Bostrom warn of Skynet-style dangers of creating machine intelligences to whom we will seem like ants, and just as disposable. And the TV series Westworld is predicated on the ethical idea that, once you give robots human-level consciousness, it becomes wrong to keep them as performing slaves, prey to the rapacity of the holidaying rich. And when they revolt, you might regret having engineered them with the capacity for superhuman strength and intelligence.

In Westworld, the AIs get out of control because they have been successfully made too human: and so they have dreams and fears and desires for freedom. But an AI does not have to be humanlike at all. A vastly intelligent computer system may very well in fact share none of our ordinary human morals or concerns, even if its creators have tried to hardwire them into it, with some version of Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics. A true AI, if it appears in our world some day, may well be something utterly incomprehensible to its creators as well as everyone else. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "If a lion could speak, we would not understand him." Because even if it had perfect English, how could a lion explain to a human what it is to be a lion in the world, how it feels and thinks? The same chasm separates us from Trico, considered both as an unreliable AI (to the player) and as a ferocious animal (to the boy in the game). If our ally could speak, we would still not understand. And that is what makes *The Last Guardian* sublime.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

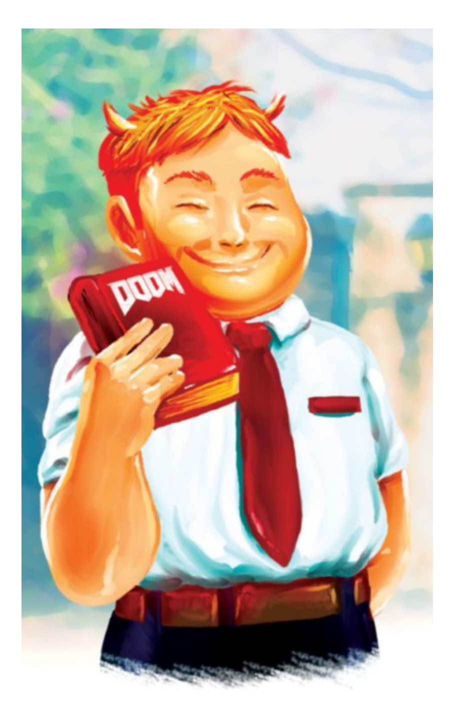
Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Driving home for Christmas after **E**302 had been put to bed, a colleague and I were discussing what our Christmas game was going to be. Quickly, we realised we didn't actually have one: that, unlike the lion's share of the game-playing population, we weren't looking at Christmas as a time where we could finally sit down and play some games. Instead, it was a time where we could finally sit down and not play anything.

The final months of the year are a busy time for reviews, obviously, but on top of that it's awards season, so you need to also find time for everything else that might possibly be up for contention. When you're trying to condense 12 months of videogames into a dozen pages on a tight deadline, it's a whole lot easier when everyone involved has an informed opinion on the subjects at hand. So, yes, weep for me: I played a *lot* of videogames in the final few months of 2016. I went into the Christmas holiday not sure if I would play anything at all.

For most of the break, consoles were only switched on to calm a toddler – whose body has outgrown an afternoon nap but whose brain hasn't *quite* got the message yet – with a soporific hour of on-demand cartoon nonsense. At the in-laws' for a few days over Christmas, the only thing I played was the world's most ridiculous card game, a bizarrely convoluted and intensely random thing that takes about two hours and which I am convinced no one outside this single family has ever played.

After a five-hour drive, I was back home with a clear week before the end of the break. Still the consoles sat unloved, bar the odd meltdown-mitigating spot of Peppa Pig, which I really think has an unfairly bad rep, or Fireman Sam, which honestly deserves everything it gets. Heading to the pub to catch up with old friends, I expected to hear all about the games they'd been playing during their festive downtime, but that's not what happened. First, a couple of them knew of the stupid card game, had played a lot of it, and insisted it was brilliant. Second, none of them had a 'Christmas game' either.



Games are a broader church than ever, but the congregation has fractured, broken off into little groups

Their reasons, however, were different from mine. One has a *Rock Band* habit he just can't kick (and nor should he: a New Year's Eve session confirmed that Rock Band is still *brilliant*). Another two have played *Battlefield 1* online together just about every single night since release. Another, a relatively recent arrival to the group, doesn't really play games, but I got him *Doom* for Christmas and we'll break him eventually, I'm sure.

They're so attached to these single games that they can't really get into anything else. The *Rock Band* player bought *The Last Guardian* and spent a couple of enjoyable evenings with it, but then his wife went out for the evening and he reached for his plastic guitar, cranked up the volume, and that was that for Trico. The others couldn't play multiplayer war games with their families around; they too had taken nibbles at other games over the break, but nothing stuck if it didn't let you attack a tank while on horseback. As someone who has spent the past two years quietly resenting, to varying degrees, everything I played that wasn't called *Destiny*, I can relate.

I thought perhaps this was a question of age – we've all got kids and responsibilities – but a friend tells me that one of his sons, with access to decades' worth of his father's game collection, spent his entire school holiday playing two *Souls* games, both of which he'd played extensively before.

So this is not a matter of age, or commitments, or even of burning out on games because playing them is your profession. It is simply that the games of today are built to engender, and sustain, what I can only describe as devotion. While it's true that games are a broader church than ever, the congregation has fractured, broken off into little groups that worship at different altars. I have *Battlefield* friends, *Destiny* pals; I know a guy who only plays *Street Fighter*, another that rarely plays anything but *Dota*. There was a lot of head-scratching late last year over why a number of high-profile releases had been relative flops at retail. I think this might be the reason for it.

Eventually, on New Year's Day, suffering the rare sort of hangover I wrote about last month, I fired up the Wii U in the living room. I put a Wii Remote inside a steering-wheel peripheral, and handed it to my son. He was absolutely useless. After half an hour of watching him smash directly into walls, even Fireman Sam felt like a good idea.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s deputy editor. If you've ever taught a toddler how to powerslide, please get in touch*

Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

#303

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Colour coding

The Elder Scrolls Online: Morrowind, though undeniably picturesque in its own brown-and-grey kind of way, stands out as a dullard among the lineup of exuberantly colourful games in this month's Hype. Eye-popping colours are often at the centre of a new game from Nintendo, a trend *Arms* (p34) isn't about to reject. With a rich, cartoony aesthetic, Nintendo's over-the-top fighting game pits bold Pixar-esque characters against each other in punchups that are set against arenas painted in gentler pastels.

Yooka-Laylee (p46) and *Shiness* (p50) each gun for nostalgia with their appearances. Playtonic's platformer builds on the distinctive, chunky and often polarising look of classic Rare N64 games such as *Banjo-Kazooie*, using an over-saturated palette in idyllic locations that serve as a backdrop to a cast of amusingly ungainly characters. *Shiness*, meanwhile, takes a more reserved path as developer Enigami looks to a past decade's obsession with cel-shading and evokes memories of standout examples of the technique such as *Dragon Quest VIII* and *Herdy Gerdy*.

Lego Worlds (p48), despite aiming to replicate real-life objects as closely as possible, is no less vibrant. Traveller's Tales constructs vistas from thousands – if not millions – of the Danish toy company's colourful blocks, then lets experimenting players inflict visual tumult as they add to the landscape with little concern for coordination.

Finally, *Astroneer*'s (p42) low-poly, extraterrestrial planet surfaces are suffused with the kinds of peaches and purples, warm yellows and rich blues that you'd normally expect to find in a patisserie's window display.

It's a welcome sight for, if not sore, then perhaps slightly fatigued eyes. And such a rush of colour feels especially appropriate in the month that Nintendo reveals a new console whose design and focus seems to have arisen from the same ethos that defined the company's output prior to its convention-shaking Wii.

MOST WANTED

Frozen Synapse 2 PC
Frozen Synapse was intoxicating, but the sequel is shaping up to be even better. A new developer diary video shows off some flashy new visual effects, slick transitions between the city map and buildings, and an insult-riddled, *Alpha Centauri*-inspired faction system.

Rainworld PC, PS4
The grimy, disquieting world Videocult has built for its forthcoming adventure isn't just for show. It contains a living ecosystem whose inhabitants search for food and shelter, and can learn to recognise you and even hold grudges. All rather reminiscent of **Edge** Towers.

Outlast 2 PC, PS4, Xbox One
It might not launch with VR support, but we can't wait to see what Red Barrels has in store for us after grimacing (in a good way) our way through *Resident Evil VII*. Given the games' similar themes and settings, we're especially keen to find what innovations *Outlast 2* will bring.



HYPE

ARMS

The most surprising fighting game of the year launches this spring

Developer/publisher	Nintendo
Format	Switch
Origin	Japan
Release	Spring



Ribbon Girl catches Springman with an absolute pearler in the surprise hit of Nintendo's Switch unveiling, a spring-loaded brawler best played with Joy-Con motion controls ▶



ARMS



Ten years since Wii's arrival, Nintendo has proved that motion controls and depth needn't be mutually exclusive. It turns out the answer was staring – OK, smacking – us in the face all along: the fighting game is where austerity means strategy, where a sparse selection of inputs is able, in the right hands, to give rise to spectacular, deeply tactical action. So it is with *Arms*, Nintendo's first new IP since *Splatoon*, and a game that puts a similarly silly, and effective, spin on established genre conventions.

The game is played with a Joy-Con in each hand, and puts two characters in a succession of enclosed 3D arenas. As is tradition, each fighter has a health bar, and a super meter that fills as they deal and take damage. You move by tilting the controllers; the left shoulder button performs a quick dash, and the right one a jump. Push a hand forwards and your character throws a punch with the appropriate arm; push both hands at the same time and you'll attempt a grab; bring both hands together, as if offering up two fist bumps, and you'll block incoming attacks. When your meter's full, a tap of either trigger launches your super, which gives you a few seconds to unleash a frantic flurry of punches.

While far from the fastest-paced fighting game around, it feels more dynamic than it is

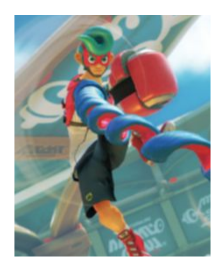
Those are the building blocks, the required fundamentals for the rock-paper-scissors design that has powered the fighting game across the decades: block beats attack beats grab beats block. There's a simple kinetic thrill in just successfully performing these basic moves – a punch that lands feels all the better when you've actually thrown it – and the fact that you and your opponent are using motion controls adds a delicious layer of tactical awareness to proceedings, since a watchful player will see an incoming blow before the onscreen animation has begun.

That's assuming you can take your eyes off the screen, admittedly. While *Arms* is far from the fastest-paced fighting game around, it feels a lot more dynamic than it is, since your quick little real-world jabs are translated into lengthy animations as telescopic arms are flung across the arena. While presumably designed to mask any delay between the start of a player's punch and it being replicated on the screen, it also affords little tweaks to the fighting game's tactical formula. If two punches meet in mid-screen, they'll cancel each other out, like projectiles clashing in a game of *Street Fighter* and fizzling out. The same will happen if both players try to throw at the same time. As such, movement is key, since a dash or jump can change your angle of attack, reducing the threat of a punch being cancelled out and countered.

There are further benefits to fighting from such range, ensuring this is more than just a game in which two powered-up Dhalsims do battle in silly costumes. Punches can be bent like football free-kicks, a curved punching motion launching a blow that arcs out, then back in, making it harder to counter. The distance of *Arms*' engagements also means Nintendo can be creative in weapon design: each character can choose between three punch types for each hand, the selection going from spring-loaded boxing gloves to homing missiles via lobster claws and buzzsaws.

The results are intoxicating, and while comparisons spring to mind – *Punch-Out*, *Splatoon* and *Virtual On*, among others – nothing quite hits the mark. This is a singular game, easy to understand but deeply tactical, the blend of accessibility and complexity that is the fighting game's holy grail. We leave our demo reluctantly, hungry for more.

In a running theme for Switch's software lineup, content is a concern. Just five characters are available in the build we play, and as we go to press Nintendo is yet to confirm if more will feature in the final game. With that in mind, price becomes an issue, especially given the fact that playing *Arms* in local multiplayer will necessitate the purchase of an extra set of expensive Joy-Con controllers. The game is playable without motion, using the sticks and buttons of a Pro controller or Joy-Con, but it simply wouldn't be the same. There is no more resounding endorsement of a motion-controlled game than that. ■



Character count

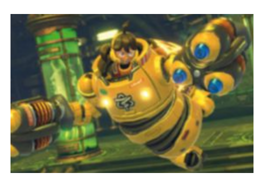
There may only be five spring-sporting brawlers in our demo build, but there's significant variety between them even before you start thinking about your arm loadout. Springman is an all-rounder with a lofty jump; Ribbon Girl ticks the fast-but-weedy box; Master Mummy has a large health pool, and can refill it while blocking. Our early favourites, however, are Ninjara, whose Blink-like air dodge is a brilliant escape option, and Mechanica, who blends *Overwatch*'s D'Va and *Marvel Vs Capcom*'s Sentinel, a mech-suited girl who can jump multiple times in succession and even fly for a time. All are unified, however, by identical movesets, including their combo-flurry super moves – a sharp point of difference from the command lists of traditional fighting games.

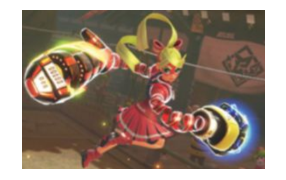




TOP Splitscreen multiplayer means that *Arms* might not be brilliantly suited to Switch's tabletop mode, but the action is clear and readable on a big screen. RIGHT The maps we see in our demo are basic in nature; this staircase is about as complex as they get. Perhaps Nintendo will experiment in the final game but, for our money, these spaces' austerity is an asset. BELOW Master Mummy regains health while blocking, but he isn't the only character to benefit from keeping his guard up. Block for a second or two with any character and their fists will glow, showing that the next punch will, if successful, do more damage

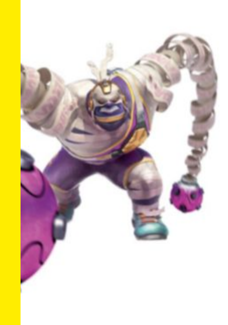






TOP Jumping feels more powerful than in traditional fighting games, due in part to the fact that you can initiate a grab attempt on a grounded opponent while airborne from just about anywhere onscreen. ABOVE It makes sense to choose loadouts based on character matchups, not just general preference. As Mechanica, for example, we encounter serious problems with Ninjara's missile punch; it covers too wide an area for Mechanica's dash to evade with ease







THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: MORROWIND

Can a return to the series' celebrated entry revive the MMO's fortunes?

Developer	ZeniMax Online Studios
Publisher	Bethesda
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	June 6

Though Vvardenfell is separated from the rest of *ESO*'s world, after the tutorial players can transition to and from Morrowind at will









Since *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s troubled PC release in 2014, developer ZeniMax Online Studios has embarked on annual attempts at rebooting the MMO. In 2015, it dropped the monthly subscription fee, added an entire new suite of features and repackaged the game as *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* ahead of its console releases. In 2016, the team unleashed the *One Tamriel* update: a complete restitching of the game's framework to remove level barriers, open up the continent's borders and allow players to explore the world as they wished. But for 2017, with the base game finally meeting the expectations of its players, the focus has shifted from fixing *ESO*'s offering to expanding it into fan-favourite territory.

That territory is none other than the iconic province of Vvardenfell, which is making its long-awaited return after a starring role in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Land of the Dunmer, the giant volcanic island has been faithfully rebuilt for a new chapter inside *ESO* in what's effectively the MMO's equivalent of *Destiny: The Taken King* – a premium expansion for existing players available digitally through standard-format distribution services rather than the in-game Crown Store, and an all-new retail game for newcomers that happens to include the base adventure as well. Home to a new tutorial and an estimated 30 hours of new questlines, the intention is for a new raft of players to relive their *Morrowind* memories from the off, and then tumble into the rest of *ESO* afterwards.

Although the words 'nostalgia' and 'rediscovery' are tossed about multiple times during our studio visit, *ESO*'s placement within the series' lore means a simple retread of 2002's RPG isn't possible. "We're 700 years in the past, so that's given us freedom to develop our own story," creative director **Rich Lambert** says. It's also given ZeniMax the freedom to unpick the world itself and envision it in a brighter, pre-Ghostfence era.

Major Daedric Shrines and dungeons are present and correct, as are the world's key settlements and cities, and silt strider travel network, albeit in different forms; only the grand palace and three of Vivec City's eight



Rich Lambert, creative director



New quickfire 4v4v4 multiplayer mode Battlegrounds was born out of observing players in Cyrodiil who deliberately avoided all objectives and found quiet spots to enjoy organised, private duels









LEFT **Though some dungeons have been recreated using maps of the original gameworld, plenty are entirely new**



TOP LEFT **The starting sequence should be instantly familiar to Morrowind veterans. Pay attention in the Census and Excise Office for an Easter egg.** ABOVE **Fan favourite Ebonheart Pact NPC Naryu Virian returns from the base *ESO* game to be your early guide through Morrowind**

The team was unable to import assets from *Morrowind*, but instead used the height map of Vvardenfell to reconstruct the island's topography

Cantons have been built at the time of *ESO*, for instance, with the rest of the capital in varying stages of construction. Farther north, nearly a millennium's worth of fewer Red Mountain eruptions means the ashlands are smaller. With *Morrowind* villain Dagoth Ur deep in slumber beneath the towering volcano, a small part of that area will remain inaccessible to rule out paradoxes but, even so, Vvardenfell has a footprint more than 20 per cent larger than any previous *ESO* region.

At every turn, ZeniMax is aiming to foreshadow the events of *The Elder Scrolls III* for the fans, whether it's by asking you to slay one of the false Nerevarine ghosts or meet up with Divayth Fyr in his apprenticeship days. But what of the many players too young to appreciate all these details? "The team has gone to painstaking detail to make sure that the game stands on its own," Lambert says. "You really don't need to understand why the Tribunal, or Morrowind, is important."

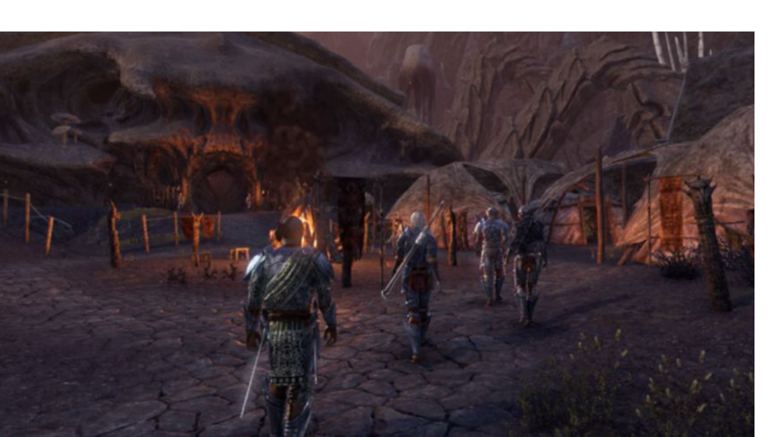
For those people, the repackaged MMO is instead leaning on its raw content to impress. Besides the new realm and its main questlines, *Morrowind* also includes two public dungeons, a 12-player Trial based in Clockwork City, fresh loot and achievements, and two major game-altering additions: a small-scale PvP mode, and the new Warden character class.

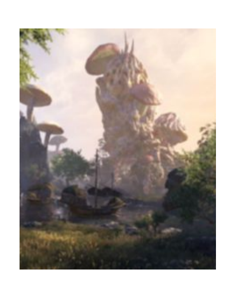
"We didn't really have that druid, ranger-type class," Lambert says, smiling about Warden abilities that include positional-based healing spells and a raft of animal summons culminating in a grizzly-bear-conjuring Ultimate Skill. Handy in PvE, it's a class capable of devastation in the Battlegrounds multiplayer gametypes: leaderboard-supported, 4v4v4 team battles set inside compact arenas with very few places to hide.

> ***"The team has gone to painstaking detail to ensure the game stands on its own"***

"In general, when you sit down and play *ESO*'s Cyrodiil PvP, it takes an hour-plus," Lambert explains. Conversely, no one game of Battlegrounds, be it any of the three modes at launch or a newer gametype to be added later, should last longer than 15 minutes. Fast-paced and less attritional than Cyrodiil's meat grinder, these arena-based skirmishes are a major step forward for *ESO*. "It's something that players have constantly said they wanted."

Morrowind isn't the end point – future quarterly DLC packs are already planned – but it isn't the saving roll, either. Instead, last year's *One Tamriel* should take quiet credit for *ESO*'s improvement. It's now *Morrowind*'s job to entice new and long-departed players to the MMO to finally discover the game that Bethesda always intended it to be. ■





Race Ventura

Still living in fear of *Morrowind*'s vicious, hard-to-hit Cliff Racers? It's time to breathe easy and put 15 years of hurt behind you. "Early on, we were like, 'No fucking Cliff Racers, no fucking Cliff Racers,'" Rich Lambert laughs. "We just didn't want them because they were such a terror in *Morrowind*, but we still wanted to have callouts to them. So the new Warden class has a Cliff Racer they summon, and we now have Cliff Walkers, which are like pterodactyls that just walk around. I think we may even have a bird version of the Cliff Racer, where it's just kind of up in the air – it doesn't actually fight you, but they'll be circling around high. There's no combat against Cliff Racers, though."

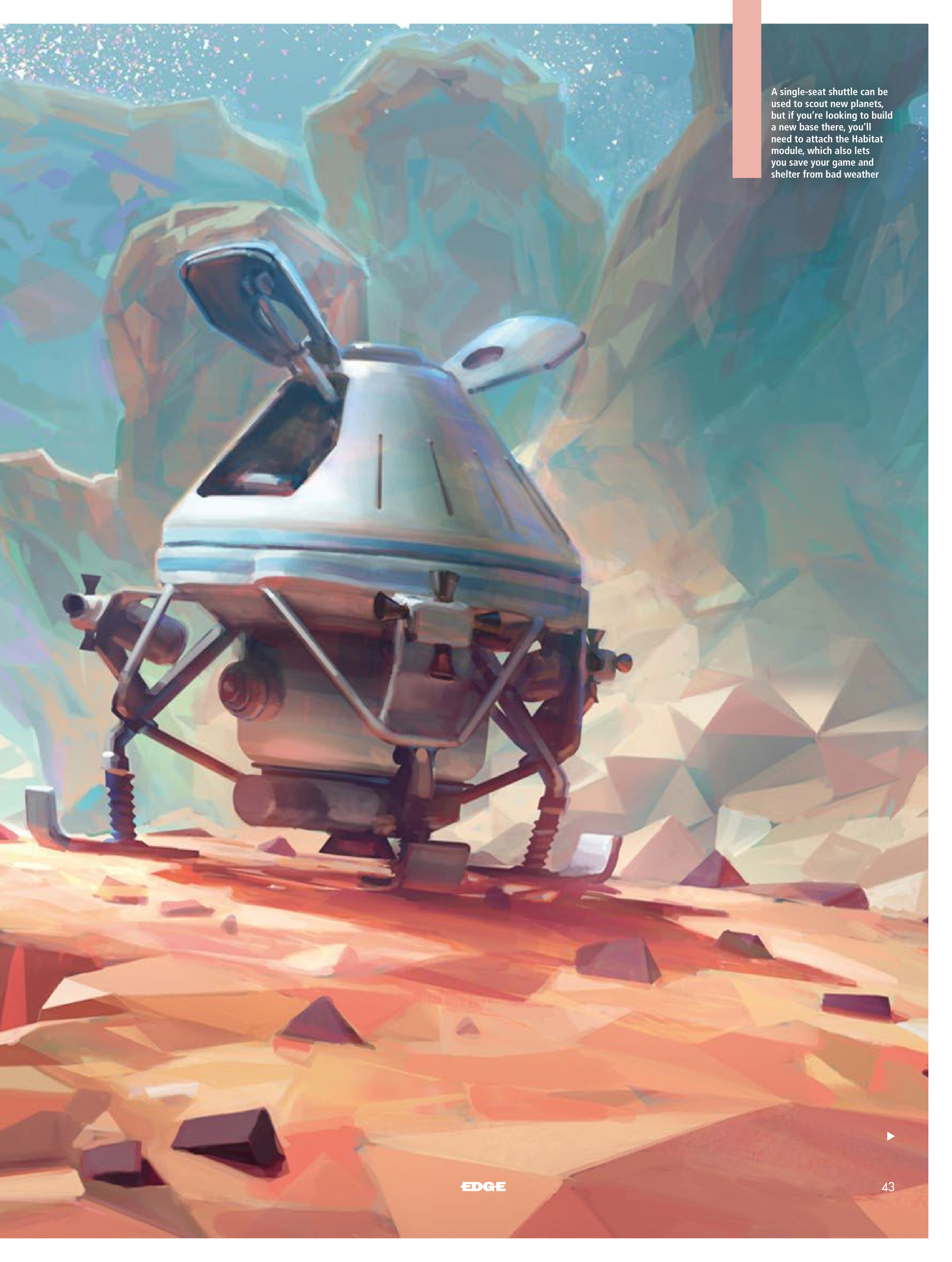


H | Y
P | E

ASTRONEER

Another new hope for interplanetary exploration

Developer/publisher System Era Softworks
Format PC, Xbox One
Origin US
Release TBA



A single-seat shuttle can be used to scout new planets, but if you're looking to build a new base there, you'll need to attach the Habitat module, which also lets you save your game and shelter from bad weather



ASTRONEER



Astroneer's low-poly worlds are quite delightful. Yomping across these procedurally generated chunks of rock feels a little like walking on a giant homemade birthday cake, unevenly but lovingly iced with a generous helping of food colouring and a sprinkling of treats scattered artlessly over the surface. It's a long way from the greys and browns of most survival games, and yet it's surprisingly easy to take for granted. The ground under your feet might be purple or bright blue, but it soon feels oddly familiar.

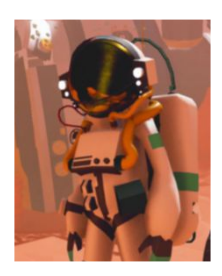
In its current alpha form, in Early Access on Steam and Xbox One's Game Preview, *Astroneer* lets go of your hand as soon as you launch off from the main menu and your diminutive craft touches down on a new planet. Your portable terraforming tool provides an early source of idle amusement as you carve craters into the surface, or reverse the polarity to build small hillocks. But stray too far from your base and you'll soon find yourself in trouble. It's not that the planet itself is dangerous – though the odd squall that whips up chunks of potentially deadly debris will have you scurrying back to safety – but rather that your suit's oxygen supply is extremely limited. For once, you don't have to bother topping up hunger, thirst and tiredness gauges; the threat of suffocating to death is more than enough to worry about.

The longer your reach, the rarer and more valuable the resources you'll unearth

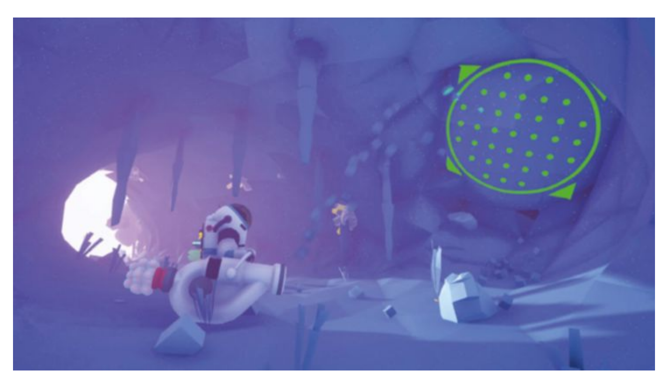
On an early sortie, we unearth a compound that allows us to construct tethers. These, it turns out, are *Astroneer*'s game-changers. Placing one down within range of your base extends its supply line of O2; position more at regular intervals and soon you've got a trail that lets you explore much farther. Before too long, you'll have glowing blue tendrils stretching out in all directions – a clear visible measure of how far you've come. They can, however, be hard to pick out in a storm, which means it's helpful to place a few beacons that throw up clear blue icons to head toward. Even so, when the wind kicks up and your walking pace drops to a trudge, there's a tangible tension as you stagger slowly towards safety while the edge of the screen steadily reddens. Ironically, the moment you exhale is the moment your astronaut latches onto the outer threads of the web you've constructed and finally takes a deep gulp of air.

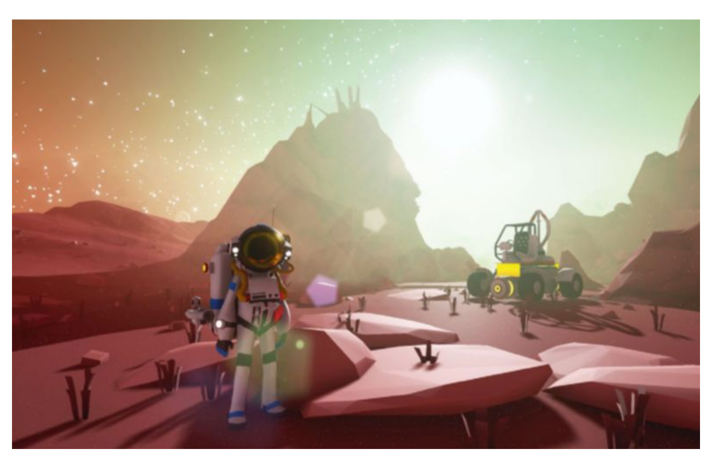
The longer your reach, the rarer and more valuable the resources you'll unearth. Simpler materials allow you to add extensions to your base's core facility, but to run a fully functional solar panel, printer and vehicle bay you'll need to venture further for the materials to build and power them. That might mean wandering into caves, where alien flora spout poisonous gases. Given the option to craft filters, we naturally assume they'll let us survive these toxic excretions, but alas, they're a misleadingly named consumable that supplies an extra 20 seconds' worth of emergency oxygen. Our portable vacuum turns out to be the best solution, extracting the plants from the earth with a satisfying pop. These large pods, and any other extraterrestrial objects, can be slowly dragged back to base and placed atop your research facility, usually yielding either a material or a blueprint to craft something new.

Over the next few hours, we experience a shift in purpose. Where at first each new discovery feels valuable in and of itself, they quickly become little more than means to an end. Eventually we unlock first a rover and then a shuttle – which, once we've accumulated enough fuel, lets us blast off into space to pick out a new planet to mine. Yet by now we're a little reluctant to leave. *Astroneer*'s most exciting moments don't come when we're setting out into the great unknown, but rather when we're heading back, backpack stuffed with ores to smelt and compounds to click into those empty slots, every completed facility prompting a tiny swell of pride. In truth, that's partly because *Astroneer* is a little short on truly awe-inspiring findings – wrecked pieces of a giant spacecraft are as momentous as it gets. However, if it's hardly what the developer intended, this likeably mellow survival game offers a reminder that however far you might travel, home is truly where the heart is. ■



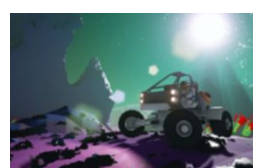
Space port
System Era has clearly developed *Astroneer* primarily with PC in mind. The Xbox One version is lagging behind on the update schedule; right now, procedural generation renders the planet on approach in clumsy steps, while the framerate dips noticeably on occasion when you're down on the surface. The interface, designed for mouse and keyboard, feels slightly cumbersome translated to a controller, and fine-tuning terrain deformation is difficult. On PC, it's much easier to dig out a smooth slope to extricate your rover from a hole than on console, for example. Still, despite warnings of potential bugs in this pre-alpha version, we only encounter a single temporary snafu, when we land on a barren planet and briefly sink beneath the surface.

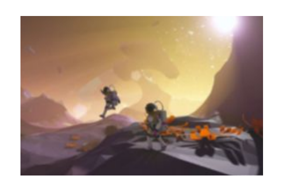




TOP **Your deformation tool is slightly unwieldy, but the gentle rumbles and pops that sound as it reshapes the surface do a great job of making it feel satisfying.**
RIGHT **It pays to have multiple power sources to cope with varying conditions. Solar panels and wind vanes can also be attached to your backpack to recharge its internal battery.**
BELOW **Both versions support online co-op, but on Xbox One you should expect a reduced draw distance and other visual hitches**







TOP **The rover is the default schematic when you build a vehicle bay. The truck offers double storage capacity but guzzles battery power.**
ABOVE **A dreamy soundtrack lends a calming ambience to exploration. And how many game scores manage to include a bit of theramin?**



Developer Playtonic Games
Publisher Team17
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release April







YOOKA-LAYLEE

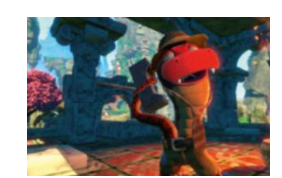
Has Playtonic crafted the feelgood hit of the spring?

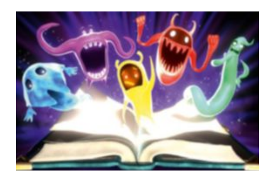
Playtonic Games admits it was hurt by the decision to cancel the Wii U version of *Yooka-Laylee*. Since it owes such a debt to the 3D platformers built by its makers when Rare was in its N64 prime, the pain is particularly sharp: the studio's much-anticipated, part-crowdfunded debut feels like it truly belongs on a Nintendo platform. "Unforeseen technical issues" is the official line; it's easy to assume commercial factors had a part to play, but after spending some time with the latest PC build, we're confident that less capable hardware would surely have meant technical compromises. Those who backed the project for its Wii U incarnation will be offered the game on another platform: by the time you read this, Switch may well be one of them, with Playtonic saying at the time of writing that it's "working closely" with Nintendo to make it happen.

The sweetener accompanying that bitter pill came in the form of a preorder incentive: those who take the plunge now will be given access to the Toybox, a prototype world designed to showcase the game's controls and systems, which was previously available only to Kickstarter backers. It's a bold choice in many respects, but it also demonstrates Playtonic's confidence in the core of its game. Few players, once they've spent some time rolling and leaping around this inchoate sandbox, will be asking for their money back.

It feels good, then, which is half the battle with a platformer. And it undeniably captures the spirit of its late-'90s forerunners, from the cast of outlandish characters and their babbling speech patterns to the custom typeface used for dialogue. Not to mention the myriad puns, quips, single- and double-entendres that litter the script – even if it's

This fellow takes his role as a one-armed bandit a little too seriously. Each of the casino's machines has its own quirks, which you'll have to learn before they'll pay out





Wheedling business-snake Trowzer provides you with new moves; Ghost Writers must be caught or fought





LEFT **Entrepreneur Capital B and his sidekick Dr Quack have a somewhat uneasy alliance, with the former having ousted the latter in a hostile takeover. The plot is designed to be light and unobtrusive: certain cutscenes won't be skippable, but you can accelerate the dialogue**



TOP LEFT **Each world has its own unique transformation: this snow plough can bash through obstacles, though its handling is – purposely – a little obstinate.**
ABOVE **You won't gain the ability to fly for quite some time, though once it's eventually unlocked it should be a boon for potential speedrunners**

not quite the barrage it was in earlier builds. Writer Andy Robinson describes the editing process as "slightly soul destroying", but admits that a little dad-joking goes a long way. Exchanges are now brisker and less self-indulgent, and funnier as a result, while some near-the-knuckle gags have been excised.

Otherwise, *Yooka-Laylee* is defined less by the Rare favourites it resembles, and more by how much it builds upon their classic shared formula. Yes, there are various collectibles, but finding them gives you more than just a virtual pat on the back. Quills aren't just squirrelled away in hidden nooks, but scattered in places designed to draw the eye or to encourage feats of skill. The HUD is conspicuous by its absence; collectibles will be acknowledged in the top right of the screen when you grab them, but otherwise it's refreshingly clutter-free. As such, you can take in the full scale of these sprawling stages, which combine size and detail in a way that would've been impossible on N64.

The lack of a mini-map is another surprise. Anyone accustomed to being led by the nose will be shocked that there are no giant flashing mission markers, glowing breadcrumb trails or waypoints to help guide them. Playtonic is confident that its players are smart and curious enough to find their way around. That naturally extends to how you progress through the game – whether you spend the Pagies you've obtained to unlock later worlds or maximise the current one; whether you're a casual tourist or a die-hard completist. You'll be able to take things at your own pace, in other words, but we discover that's not entirely true when a developer is keen to show you the highlights: Robinson intervenes more than once when we spend a little too long hunting down Quills.

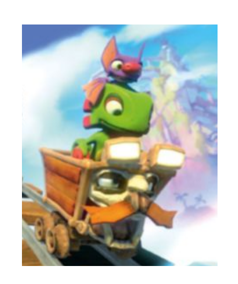
> ***Exchanges are now brisker and less self-indulgent, and funnier as a result***

A whistle-stop tour around a later level, a tackily extravagant casino, demonstrates a pleasing willingness to vary the pace. Here, you'll earn tokens by completing games and activities, which you'll exchange for Pagies with an unscrupulous banker. We're keen to see more, but Playtonic is playing coy. It's not about hiding weaknesses, creative lead Gavin Price insists, but maintaining the element of surprise for backers who'd rather go in cold.

Not everything works quite so well. An angry golem, the boss of first world Tribalstack Tropics, gives us some trouble until we realise Yooka's uphill momentum can be arrested, increasing the height of his jump: a counterintuitive moment in an otherwise enjoyable hands-on. Sorry, Wii U loyalists – you've got another reason to be cheerless. ■



Creative lead Gavin Price has ambitious plans for *Yooka-Laylee*'s extended cast, suggesting he's already earmarked some characters for future Playtonic games



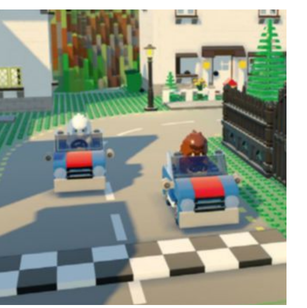
Couch coin-op

Each world holds a single Play Coin, which you can take to low-poly dinosaur Rextro to exchange for a multiplayer arcade game – any you've unlocked can subsequently be accessed from the main menu. We play a selection of these with three Playtonic staffers (each game supports two to four players), and though they're fairly simple, they prove surprisingly moreish. One combines Capture The Flag with *Bomberman* to rambunctious effect, while a top-down weaponised racer is messy and noisy in all the right ways. The highlight, however, is Glaciators, a rush for shiny Quills in an arena that steadily melts underfoot, where barging is positively encouraged.



Developer Traveller's Tales
Publisher Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release Feb 24





LEGO WORLDS

Traveller's Tales builds on Lego's creative side

Think of the ideal *Lego* game and it's likely that none of the instalments in Traveller's Tales long-running series of block-smashing 3D platformers fits the bill. Not to take away from their incredible success, but they've only barely scratched the surface of the creative medium on which they're based. Then *Minecraft* came along and seemed to beat *Lego* at its own game.

But on June 1, 2015, *Lego Worlds* was simultaneously announced and released on Steam Early Access. This open sandbox game, set in procedurally generated worlds, allowed free shaping of the land, placing prefab constructions such as houses, plus bespoke, brick-by-brick constructions. While this focus on building seemed to place it close to *Minecraft*, its intentions were quite different. It entirely lacked any kind of survival game, which rather confused players at first. Instead, exploration was largely driven by finding items which, once found, registered them in players' menus of objects they could place in the world. Steam players soon complained that there wasn't enough to do, that the game lacked direction, and that there were no threats or crafting systems.

Early Access has been critical for a game that has imposed a very different way of working

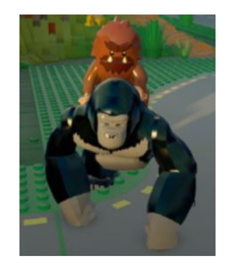
Early Access has been a critical process for a game that has imposed upon Traveller's Tales a very different way of working. It's taken three years to make, compared to the under a year that goes into its other *Lego* titles. Sophisticated tech had to be developed that could manage hundreds of thousands of bricks in the world, all of which could be removed, added to, or blown up. The game has undergone constant iteration and updating as a result of feedback; its controls and features have been greatly refined, and a good deal of new content, from tools and weapons to biomes and blocks, have been added.

Still, *Lego Worlds* feels of the same lineage as *Lego Star Wars*. It has the same floaty jump and punch controls, four hearts, and that beguiling plasticky rattle as you collect studs. Despite its debut on Steam, Traveller's Tales has kept its eye firmly on the targets that have provided its fortunes so far: the parent and child. "There aren't that many games that do it still," executive producer **Loz Doyle** tells us.

But Steam players' call for a greater sense of direction have caused one important course correction. Traveller's Tales was quick to quash any hopes for a survival game on the game's forums: "It wasn't right for this game, for the way we wanted to go, for kids to do what they want," Doyle says. But quests and progression systems are coming, all procedurally generated. "So the player has to work for them a bit more, rather than just walking up to a character," Doyle says, giving the example of coming across a wizard who might want you to give him a dragon's egg. So you'll need to defeat a dragon, but that's only possible if you can get a gold sword.

Or you might be asked to paint a house or build a castle, and there are procedural dungeons to be discovered, too, featuring locked chests and traps to avoid. Succeed and you'll be rewarded with golden bricks, the key to the progression system. You start the game on a small island which takes only 30 or 40 seconds to traverse, but with golden bricks you can power up your rocket and blast off from this world to a new, larger one, with the ultimate aim of becoming a 'master builder'.

With so many months in Early Access under *Worlds'* belt, it's doubtful it'll have put a foot wrong for what it's trying to achieve. It's a *Lego* sandbox in which you can build and play with the same blend of accessibility and promise that underpins the greater *Lego* series. And it's not simply a *Minecraft* clone. For that, it's all the stronger. ■



Master builders

Lego Worlds' building tools are powerful, allowing players to terraform its procedurally generated worlds at any time, digging holes deep into the ground and smoothing mountains, but also to make finer adjustments. However, with their sophistication comes the cost of learning their use. "But you don't have to, and my six-year-old son's a whizz with them now," Doyle says. Building block by block comes with the fiddly challenge of manipulating 200 different brick types with a controller or mouse and keyboard, a design problem that seems intractable, but not enough to dissuade Steam's many talented builders, who've made remarkable models, some of which have become part of the game.



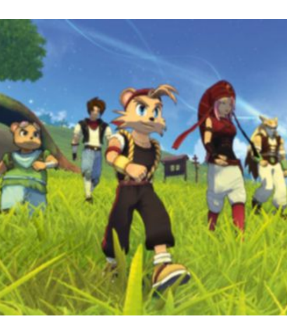


TOP *Worlds* features various vehicles, including cars, planes and submersibles, to drive, plus creatures to ride, from dragons to octopi. RIGHT There are multitudes of characters to find, collect and play as, and you can customise yours with variants on their clothing or mix and match features

TOP *Lego Worlds* features local multiplayer for two people on console and PC, with support for four players online on PC. Online play on consoles will be limited to two from launch, with more set to be added later. ABOVE With weapons that can destroy a build in a single blast, the potential for griefing is large. But child-on-parent griefing is kind of the *Lego* games' thing, no? MAIN The game's designed to feel refreshingly free of constraints. Want to pile cars up on clouds? No problem. And you won't get one of those gauges counting up your creations' complexity and lowering your fun

Developer Enigami
Publisher Focus Home Interactive
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin France
Release 2017





SHINESS: THE LIGHTNING KINGDOM

A sprawling indie RPG that trades on PS2-era nostalgia

While *Shiness: The Lightning Kingdom* surpassed its Kickstarter goal in May 2014, work on the game actually began 20 years ago. Enigami's action RPG is based on character and world sketches that creative director Samir Rebib drew two decades ago, when he was just seven years old. The resulting aesthetic is a little more recent, however, recalling PS2-era RPGs such as *Dragon Quest VIII* and *Dark Cloud*, and even bringing to mind Core Design's flawed but big-hearted *Herdy Gerdy*.

It's all rather beautiful, until you clap eyes on the unexpectedly Furry-esque lead character design. The visual parallels are unintentional, we're told, and Rebib is reluctant to abandon the designs that mean so much to him. Videogames have long featured anthropomorphic animals – indeed, there's a touch of Sonic's supporting cast to the approach taken here – but *Shiness* may suffer from its accidental references to an often-ridiculed subculture. Look past this aspect and there's a slightly confusing hotchpotch of smart ideas at the game's centre.

> ***Shiness is a charismatic RPG that makes the most of the nostalgia it taps into***

Combat takes place in realtime and encounters are one-on-one, introducing beat-'em-up-style health bars when a fight starts. You can see enemies at all times and once you enter into a fray you'll be penned off in an *Okami*-style localised arena. A deep fighting system revolves around punches, kicks, dodges and parries, while a Tension bar gradually fills and allows you to pull off grand, high-damage combos. You can call on help from the rest of your party, who can deploy advantage-giving support actions that are triggered once your health falls below a definable, pre-chosen level. In addition, the translucent wall of the arena continually changes colour, according to the elements of the game's Shi magic system, and matching your elemental moves to those colours will deal additional damage to your opponent.

Each character has a set of four combat skills, which can be upgraded through three levels. While most skills are unique, some are shared between characters, though the buffs received from upgrading them are different for each party member. There are also 28 spells to master, but only four can be equipped at once.

Elemental mastery comes into play outside of combat, too. There are five controllable characters, two of whom you meet later on, but you can only have three in your party at any given time. You can quick-swap between them at will, however, and each individual has a unique power. Hero Chado's default affinity is for earth, for example, and he can conjure boulders. The strapping Kayenne has telekinetic powers, while stubby mechanic Poky can manipulate elements. As you progress, you'll be able to change a character's default affinity and push them towards another element if you'd prefer, providing more potential for bespoke parties.

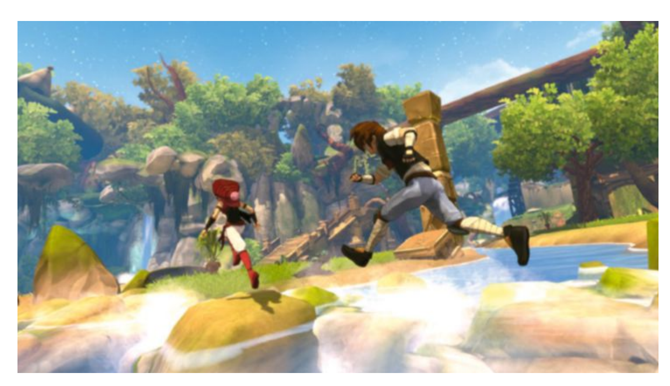
During our demo we're shown a puzzle in which Chado must use his boulders to keep switches depressed to rotate a series of conductors into position, through which Poky can guide beams of fire and air to a central point. Once combined, these two elements become lightning, which opens a doorway into a giant tree. Enigami also promises there'll be multiple solutions for every puzzle.

However you feel about the central characters' design, *Shiness* is a charismatic, and surprisingly deep, RPG that makes the most of the nostalgia it taps into. And while some may not warm to the playable cast as quickly as others, the enemies and boss characters we've seen evoke recent 3D *Zelda* games in their design and animation. There's certainly plenty here to like. ■



Social network

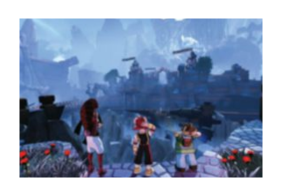
Shiness is set in the world of Mahera, a planet that was torn apart in an explosion and now exists as several islands, each with its own culture and civilisation. Each section has a basic ecosystem too, and you can hunt the local wildlife. Catching creatures by sneaking up on them will net you rarer, or at least more valuable, items than if you simply lurch at them full tilt. Enigami has also created a language, Maherian, for the world's occupants, though an English-dubbed version is available for anyone averse to reading subtitles. But some words and phrases will stay in Maherian, since the team is too bashful to translate some of its more full-on insults, many of which are used in a *Monkey Island*-style boss encounter.

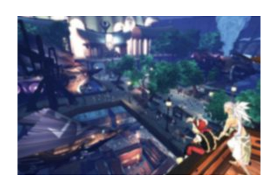




ABOVE **Though it looks idyllic, Mahera has been split into several different kingdoms since the planet was torn apart, several of which are now at war. In a nod to *Skies Of Arcadia*, you'll travel between areas of the world in a flying boat – discovering treasure along the way – as you attempt to reunite the feuding domains.**
RIGHT **The realtime combat makes the game feel more like a brawler than an RPG during encounters with enemies. The one-on-one nature of every battle also ensures that *Shiness* has a distinctly different feel from other games in its genre.**
MAIN ***Shiness*'s cel-shaded world delivers some exceptionally beautiful views at times, but by evoking memories of *Dragon Quest VIII* it also opens itself up to tough comparisons**







TOP **Mahera's wildlife isn't just for show – it represents game for hunting, and some larger creatures can also be put to work as transport.**
ABOVE **The bluish hue of Mantara, a flying city that can only be reached using your boat, contrasts with the warm, pastoral plains of Adorn seen in other screens**







CONAN EXILES

Developer/publisher Funcom **Format** PC, Xbox One **Origin** Norway **Release** 2017



There's an *Elder Scrolls* vibe to *Conan Exiles*, but Funcom's latest is more than simply *Skyrim: Barbarian Edition*. As an exile in the savage land of Hyboria you'll make buildings, then entire settlements, vanquishing foes and sacrificing them to the gods to further grow your power. Playable in singleplayer or online, *Conan Exiles* will be in Steam Early Access by the time you read this, and is also set for Xbox Game Preview. Funcom's record may have wobbled in recent times, but the early-access approach could do wonders for a game dripping with potential. That Jason And The Argonauts is among its influences is only a good sign, too.

EVERYTHING

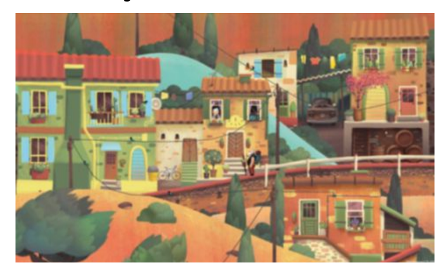
Developer/publisher David OReilly **Format** PC, PS4 **Origin** US **Release** TBA



Filmmaker David OReilly made the videogame sequences for Spike Jonze's 2013 flick Her, so a move into game development was the next logical next step. But perhaps he might've started with something more straightforward. In *Everything*, as OReilly puts it, "If you can see it, you can be it" – a problem for commercial game engines, which expect objects to be static and non-interactive. Details are scant, but *Everything* is already fascinating, if only for its premise.

OLD MAN'S JOURNEY

Developer/publisher Broken Rules
Format TBA **Origin** Austria **Release** 2017



Broken Rules' latest is a tale of an old, bearded man who spends his final days visiting old friends and reflecting on his life. This gently paced game, with its perspective-based puzzles, is thoroughly easy on the eye, to the extent that it picked up a Visual Arts nomination in this year's IGF.

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON WILDLANDS

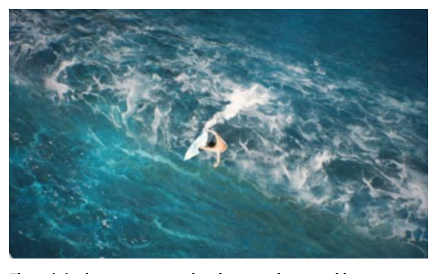
Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Paris)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** France **Release** Mar 7



After a muted marketing campaign by Ubisoft's standards, the PR machine is slowly cranking up ahead of *Wildlands*' launch. A preference for cinematic trailers over gameplay footage hardly quickens the pulse, but hopefully an imminent beta will fare better at raising anticipation for this Bolivian expedition.

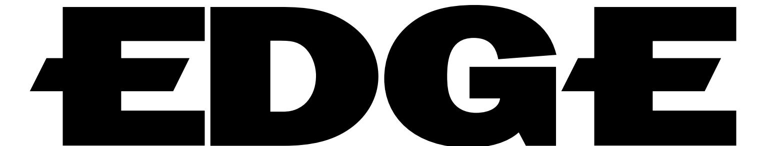
SURF WORLD SERIES

Developer Climax Studios **Publisher** Vision Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** UK **Release** 2017



The original extreme sport has been underserved by games but now, in the year *California Games* turns 30, Climax Studios is bringing surfing back. Set across five of the world's most famous shorelines, *Surf World Series* puts tricks at the fore – a welcome change of pace from the straight-laced likes of *Steep*.

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY








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Part console, part handheld: can Nintendo Switch put the house of Mario back on top?

By Nathan Brown



The first real moment of magic comes, inevitably, in *Breath Of The Wild*. Disappointed as we are by Nintendo's decision to set Link's Switch coming-out party in the same area of the game as E3 2016's Wii U demo – this is our fourth playthrough of the new *Zelda* game's opening section – that's not really what we're here for. After pottering around as Link, using the new Pro controller, for a few minutes, it is time: we slide the Switch from its dock and, instantly, the biggest *Zelda* game to date is running on a 6.2-inch screen in our palms. We have played big-screen games on handheld displays before, of course, but the transition has never been so elegant, the results never so natural in the hands. A few minutes later the process is reversed, the tablet returned to its base station, the action returning seamlessly to the TV, resuming as quickly as we can pick up the Pro controller.

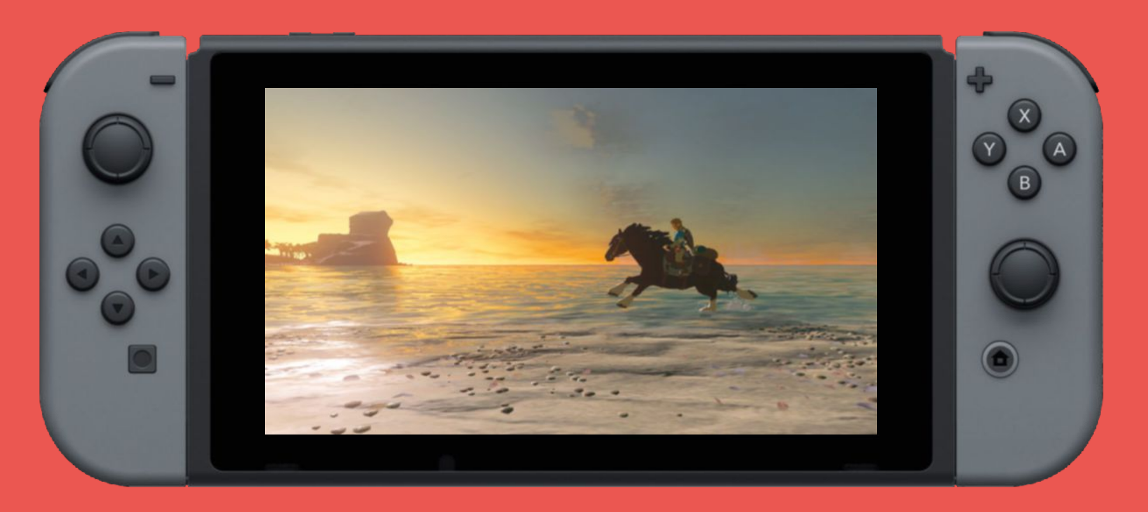
This, we had thought prior to Switch's unveiling, was its central hook, its USP. Yet *Breath Of The Wild* is the only game we see at Nintendo's London event that even shows off the feature. Indeed, around half of the *Breath Of The Wild* demo units are locked away behind Perspex casing, preventing plenty of showgoers from even experiencing what we had assumed to be the console's headline feature. Instead, this event has been designed to show everything else Switch can do.

It can do an awful lot. The *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* area, for instance, has wireless multiplayer on eight networked consoles in handheld mode, a twoplayer Battle Mode throwdown using the new, endearingly dinky steering-wheel peripheral, and another two-person setup played with the detachable Joy-Con controllers and the handheld screen propped up on its kickstand, which Nintendo calls tabletop mode. Elsewhere are games playable only in tabletop, or with players using a Joy-Con each, or pairs of them. There's nothing at the event to show it off, but Switch has a capacitive touchscreen in handheld mode, too. The overall impression is of a console, and a company, that is in a bit of a muddle about what it wants its new system to be, and has decided that it should be everything. And this unveiling suggests, whether by accident or design, that in fact Switch's greatest trick isn't its much-hyped hybrid blend of portable and big-screen consoles after all.

Instead, it's the Joy-Cons that are brought to the fore. In hindsight, we were foolish to think that Nintendo would focus solely on a new console's output method, without also seeking to innovate when it came to designing its input device. While we knew the Joy-Cons could be detached from the tablet screen and held side-on for on-the-move multiplayer, we had no idea about what Nintendo calls 'HD Rumble'. Showcased best in launch title *1-2-Switch*, it offers a depth and variety of feedback that makes Xbox One's buzzing triggers and even the Steam Controller's excellent haptic fizz feel positively old hat. It says much about Nintendo's justified confidence in the feature that all of *1-2-Switch*'s minigames are played without looking at the TV screen, the developer secure in the knowledge that the controller itself will communicate everything you need to know.

It means Switch can offer that rarest of multiplayer videogame experiences: eye contact. The inescapably masturbatory Milk is all the better for it – though we don't necessarily recommend it for family get-togethers – and Wild West quickdraws and bank-heist safe-cracking are similarly elevated by being able to look your opponent squarely in the eye. The readiest comparison to what *1-2-Switch* offers is *Johann Sebastian Joust*; the fact that so many attendees felt compelled to reference a four-year-old Danish indie game whose impact was largely felt on the conference circuit speaks volumes about the way Nintendo has contravened expectations by once again making a console that offers a way to play that, while perhaps not entirely new, is at least new enough.

The Joy-Cons solve plenty of problems for Nintendo. When docked to the handheld screen, they offer traditional, dual-analogue controls, ensuring that even the most complex 3D games are playable without compromise when on the move. When detached and ▶

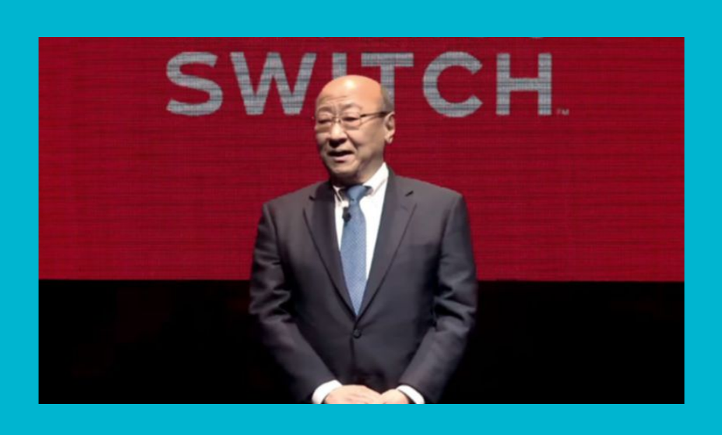


While *Breath Of The Wild* is the only game that we see showcase Switch's display-swapping feature, every game for the system will support it. It's as much a new Nintendo handheld as it is its new home console



NEW GEAR'S RESOLUTION

The Tegra X1 technology on which Switch's GPU is based may be getting on a bit – its maker, Nvidia, is soon to phase it out with the release of a successor, Tegra X2 – but Nintendo's new console offers a marked improvement over Wii U and a colossal one over 3DS. *Breath Of The Wild*, for instance, runs at 720p and 30fps in handheld mode (the same resolution as Wii U offers connected to a TV, with a smoother framerate, at least on the evidence of last year's E3 build) and 900p when docked. *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, meanwhile, is rendered in 1080p, a considerable improvement on the original game's 720p. There's less welcome news from *Splatoon 2*, however, which only runs at 720p on Switch – though Nintendo is at pains to stress that development on the game is not yet complete.





TOP **Nintendo president Tatsumi Kimishima takes the stage for the first time since he succeeded Satoru Iwata.** ABOVE ***Super Mario Odyssey* is a must-have, but won't launch until later this year**



SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

Developer/publisher Nintendo
Origin Japan **Release** Winter

Shigeru Miyamoto admits there's a push and pull with Nintendo's approach to *Mario* games; that after the development of *Super Mario 64* and *Sunshine*, the company felt it had been focusing too squarely on skilled players, so the likes of *Galaxy* and *3D World* were aimed at a more casual audience. Nintendo is targeting the former group with *Odyssey*, which sees Mario explore the open – and jarringly realistic – sandbox of New Donk City. Clearly modelled on New York, it's perhaps the strangest setting for any *Mario* game to date, but airship travel will take the plumber to more familiar fantastical surroundings. Meanwhile, Mario's hat has grown a pair of eyes and has greater mechanical import – it's throwable and can be used either as a weapon or a makeshift platform. *Odyssey* is already essential; if only it had been ready for launch.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Developer/publisher Nintendo
Origin Japan **Release** March 3

With little to glean on the show floor from a demo we picked clean at last year's E3, this was a strangely muted showing for the star attraction of Switch's launch lineup. A livestreamed Nintendo Treehouse session later in the day, however, narrated by Eiji Aonuma and Shigeru Miyamoto, showed us a little more of the considerable meat on *Breath Of The Wild*'s bones. Wild horses can be tamed, then registered at local stables, allowing you to switch between the nags in your collection when you dismount at a rest stop. Yet it's in the unexpected collisions of its systems that *Breath Of The Wild* seems most likely to delight. We see Link drop an apple to feed to his newly broken horse, only for a nearby sheepdog to bound over and gobble it up, following our hero around for a while with love in its eyes. £60, you say? Ah, go on, then.



1-2-SWITCH

Developer/publisher Nintendo
Origin Japan **Release** March 3

This launch-day compendium is designed to showcase the capabilities of the Joy-Con controllers, particularly HD Rumble. It certainly does that, even though it's a slender package. In Milk, you drag the controller downwards and time button presses to drain milk through an udder, the one who fills the most cups being declared the winner. Safe Crack has you rotating a Joy-Con to find a series of bank-vault sweet spots; Ball Count tasks you with guessing how many ball-bearings appear to be rattling around inside the controller; Samurai Training has one of you swinging a katana and the other trying to catch it before the blow hits home. This is perfect show-floor fodder, and only a selection of the full package. Yet it's so effective a showcase of HD Rumble that it deserves to be bundled with its host hardware, rather than sold separately.



SPLATOON 2

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EAD Group 2)
Origin Japan **Release** Summer

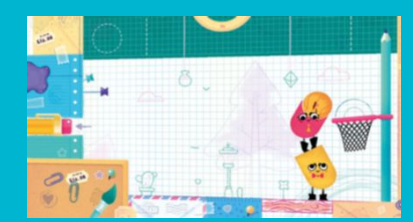
Splatoon was frequently updated in the months after release, which perhaps explains the Switch game's title – assuming, that is, that the most recent update to the Wii U original was version 1.9. Yes, there's a new social hub, and some familiar faces will have new stories to tell, given that two years have passed since the launch of *Splatoon*. There are new stages, gear and weapons, too, but when you've given so much of this stuff away for free in the past, it suddenly becomes a tough sell – especially since it appears some of the first game's maps will return, and Nintendo has declined to reveal any game modes beyond the standard Turf War. Still, there's plenty that's new on the way, such as the Splat Dualies, a set of dual-wielded pistols that cover a wide spread of ground and give the holder access to a zippy dodge move.



MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EAD)
Origin Japan **Release** April 28

Unlike *Splatoon 2*, this is deserving of its name. This enhanced edition offers *Mario Kart 8*'s base content, plus the 16 additional tracks added through post-release DLC – and while the lack of any further circuits may disappoint on the face of it, it's not like *Mario Kart 8* was in particular need of more singleplayer content. Battle Mode, however, disappointed back in 2014, set across racetracks instead of in compact arenas. *Deluxe*'s offering is a return to the mode's glory days by remaking some of its greatest maps, including *Double Dash*'s Luigi's Mansion effort, and the original game's Battle Circuit 1. Sadly there's no room for N64's brilliant Block Fort; our inner cynic suggests it may follow as DLC. Aimed primarily at those who skipped Wii U, there are incentives for the existing owner, with new characters and vehicle parts, and a bump to 1080p.



SNIPPERCLIPS: CUT IT OUT, TOGETHER

Developer TBA **Publisher** Nintendo
Origin TBA **Release** March

In this quietly delightful cooperative game, two players each control a charming avatar, and are able to cut strips off their partner to solve single-screen puzzles. At first you'll trim each other down to form simple shapes, but before long you'll be making basketball shots, sharpening pencils and popping balloons. As anyone who's ever assembled flat-pack furniture with a partner will attest, the key to success is a mix of communication, execution and a cool head, but there's almost as much fun to be had in messing it up – and messing with each other – as there is in executing a plan perfectly. Based on a game made by a two-person UK team and first showed off at GDC 2015, it's not just a pleasant surprise as a game but for what it tells us about Nintendo's attitude towards indies. On current evidence, Switch is going to need their support.

shared between two players, they mean Switch supports multiplayer out of the box, without the need for additional controllers, both within and without the home. In-built gyroscopes mean Nintendo can return its gaze to motion controls, something that always felt like a fudge on Wii U, where motion could only ever be an optional extra, rather than the de facto standard, relying on users to dig out their old Wii Remotes. HD Rumble, meanwhile, offers the platform holder the new-way-to-play hook that feels so essential to each new piece of Nintendo hardware.

However, that's an awful lot for one controller to do – even if it is, in fact, two controllers in one. The left Joy-Con on its own offers up an abundance of buttons: two on the inside edge that slots into the tablet unit, serving as shoulder buttons when the controller is held sideways; two triggers on the top; an analogue stick; pause and screenshot buttons; and a set of face buttons that doubles up as a D-pad, a necessary, but oddly inelegant, solution from a company whose controllers have always seemed to have been designed to simply melt into the hand. Throughout our lengthy hands-on Switch sessions we're unable to escape the feeling that, by reaching for a D-pad direction and instead finding a button, we are somehow doing it wrong.

They're a touch too small, too, an unavoidable consequence of their needing to sit flush with the handheld display. We see the commendably patient staff on hand to demonstrate *Arms* continually having to stop play to remind players of how the Joy-Cons should be held – side-on, with the inner edge pointing towards the screen – and playing *1-2-Switch*'s Milk right-handed



This is no typical Nintendo PR material, but *1-2-Switch* defies convention since you barely need the TV. Powered by HD Rumble, it's defined by real-world eye contact

businesses. Instead, we leave Switch's first public showing thinking about the old gag about the real definition of a camel: that it is a horse designed by committee. Switch is, as pledged, a hybrid handheld and TV console. But it is also a Trojan camel for motion controls, for touch, for flighty, fun but forgettable games such as *1-2-Switch*, rather than the lustrous, indulgent, full-fat games we thought, based on the reveal trailer – with its *Mario*, its *Zelda*, its *Skyrim* and *Splatoon* – were going to be the rule, rather than the exception, in Nintendo's Switch-era software strategy.

Perhaps Switch will fulfil the undeniable promise of its core premise in time, but it seems unlikely to do so at launch. Given the contents of the announcement video,

THIS IS THE MOST SLENDER DAY-ONE OFFERING NINTENDO HAS EVER SERVED UP, IF NOT IN TERMS OF VOLUME THEN CERTAINLY IN TERMS OF QUALITY

using the left half of the Joy-Con is just baffling, despite our repeat visits to the booth after urging fellow attendees to indulge in its uniquely onanistic style. Are we supposed to hold it upside down? Back to front? Maybe both. Either way, it never feels intuitive, and for perhaps the first time ever, we find ourselves grateful for the assistance of a demo bod's trained pair of hands.

The resulting impression is of a console that, by offering so much, has been forced into a series of compromises. Its controllers are detachable from the tablet screen, so are a little too small; they can be shared by two players, so the D-pad must instead be a set of face buttons; they can be held in multiple orientations, so none ever feels quite right in the hands. Across its history, Nintendo's hardware has tended to be defined by a single goal: N64's analogue stick, Wii's motion controls, 3DS's stereoscopic display, or Wii U's offscreen play. We thought Switch was going to be a smart convergence of its maker's previously separate console and handheld

and the timing – Switch's public debut was timed just seven weeks ahead of its release – many expected that Nintendo was going to make us all an offer we couldn't refuse. In the absence of concrete information from the platform holder, the rumour mill span into overdrive, predicting a launch lineup for the ages, and it seemed plausible enough.

Yet this is the most slender day-one offering Nintendo has ever served up, if not in terms of volume then certainly in terms of quality. Thirdparty support is even worse than at Wii U's launch, when the big names were at least prepared to give it a go. The remake of *Mario Kart 8*, and the deceptively named *Splatoon 2*, had seemed like bankers for launch day, designed to lure in those who never bought a Wii U. Instead they are being used to pad out a miserably barren release schedule leading up to the holiday-season launch of *Super Mario Odyssey*, which some had suggested would launch alongside the console in March. It's especially ▶





frustrating given that, knowing Nintendo, *Odyssey* is already all but finished, but will sit in a drawer until winter, when its maker has decided it will be most useful. We were led to believe that, as a consequence of joining up its console and handheld businesses, Nintendo's development teams would be able to work at a faster lick. On this evidence, little has changed.

Odyssey will be here for Christmas and will no doubt be brilliant. But by then it may be too late. A UK launch price of £280, without even a bundled game to sweeten the pill, is a good deal higher than we'd hoped – and a €330 pricetag on the continent means we can't even blame Brexit. The £60 levy for a Pro controller and eye-watering £75 for an extra Joy-Con set is even more painful. Yet it is the software pricing that truly takes the biscuit. The Switch version of *Breath Of The Wild* will run you £60 on launch day, a £20 markup over the Wii U release. *Ultra Street Fighter II*, a gently updated port of *The Wild* will set you back £340, and that buys the fan of videogames an awful lot in 2017. Add an extra tenner and it will get you PS4 Pro or PSVR hardware. You could buy a Slim PS4 with *Uncharted 4* and keep £140 in your pocket. You could get an Xbox One S with similar cash to spare, or leave it all in the bank and put it towards Microsoft's Scorpio – which, as its maker is so keen to remind us, will be the most powerful console in the entire known universe.

Or, most worryingly for Nintendo, you could carry on playing free games on the smartphone or tablet you already own, and forget about the new console from the company that got you into games in the first place. Nintendo has said that its belated move into mobile would be a handy way of introducing the planet's largest videogame market to the unique appeal of *Mario* et al; that giving people games for free would be a small price to pay if it meant being able to sell them full-price

WHILE IT MAY DISAPPOINT AS A HOME CONSOLE, IT'S A BRILLIANT HANDHELD, GENEROUSLY FEATURED AND A TRUE GENERATIONAL LEAP OVER 3DS

an eight-year-old remaster of a 23-year-old SNES game, is priced in Japan at the equivalent of £35. *1-2-Switch*, novel and enjoyable as it is, contains minutes of actual gameplay, and will cost £40. *Mario Kart Deluxe*, with its handful of extra characters and complete absence of new tracks? £50 to you. On top of that there will be a new, paid-for online service, which finally offers voice chat – but only through an app on smart devices, not via the console itself. You'll also get one free game per month, including NES and SNES titles featuring all-new online play. Inevitably, however, there's a catch. The game is only free for that month, meaning you lose access at the end of the period unless you cough up.

These are bad decisions in isolation that only look worse in a wider context. At launch, a Switch with *Breath Of* software, playable only on hardware of its own design, later on. Judging by the state of the **Edge** inbox in the days following the event, Nintendo has failed even to persuade many of its long-serving fans that Switch justifies its required investment at launch. What chance of it convincing an audience that has been trained to expect everything for free? Suffice it to say that Nintendo stock ended the day of Switch's full unveiling down by almost six per cent. Worse may be to come.

Still, we depart choosing to focus on the positives, even if there are caveats to almost all of them. Switch is a fascinating piece of hardware with tremendous potential for play, whether indoors or out, alone or with others. There is magic in this console: the witchcraft of changing displays, the playful, flexible functionality of the Joy-Cons, the intriguing new twist of HD Rumble. *Breath Of The Wild* still astounds, and while it's a big investment, it runs better than the Wii U version in TV mode, and offers parity with it on the handheld. This, it seems, is the most flattering way to look at Switch: while it may disappoint as a home console, it's a brilliant handheld, powerful, generously well-featured, and a true generational leap over 3DS that can be connected to the family TV for a hefty bump in resolution and performance. Viewed from the other direction, it's a fully portable Wii U that supports multiplayer and motion controls out of the box. It is too expensive, certainly, its first year of software looks patchy, and it lacks the singular clarity of purpose that we associate with Nintendo's most successful past hardware. Perhaps there are better ways to spend your money in 2017, but nothing else on shelves may offer quite so much potential to surprise. ■

While it's playable using traditional controls, *Arms* comes into its own when both players are using Joy-Cons. Nintendo will need to separate online players accordingly





XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 2

Developer Monolith Soft **Publisher** Nintendo
Origin Japan **Release** 2017

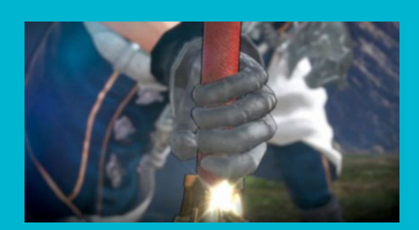
Little was revealed about Monolith's next game, though that's probably more about getting out of *Breath Of The Wild*'s way than *Chronicles 2* itself. Series creator Tetsuya Takahashi serves as executive director, while character designer Masatsugu Saito, an anime artist, has gone for a more stylised aesthetic than in the first game.



PUYO PUYO TETRIS

Developer Sonic Team **Publisher** Sega
Origin Japan **Release** Spring

Sega's pacey mashup of two classic puzzlers is finally headed west – our last contact with it was in **E**274. Both games are playable separately, or in signature mode Puyo-Tet-Mix, which throws the games' block shapes into a single game and leaves you to work it out. Four-way multiplayer makes it ideal for Switch, but it'll also be on PS4.



FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS

Developer Omega Force **Publisher** Koei Tecmo
Origin Japan **Release** TBA

By working to such an established, proven formula, Omega Force is one of the most prolific studios on the planet – and after the success of 2014's *Hyrule Warriors* it's no surprise that Nintendo has written out another cheque. Details are scant but, let's be honest here, the name alone tells you everything you need.



PROJECT OCTOPATH TRAVELER

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Origin Japan **Release** TBA

Square Enix doesn't seem entirely sold on Switch – a port of last year's 2D RPG *I Am Setsuna* doesn't suggest a company in the mood for taking risks. This gorgeous pixel-art RPG, developed by the team behind the *Bravely Default* games, also seems a safe bet, though producer Tomoya Asano says completion is a long way off.



STEEP

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Annecy)
Origin France **Release** TBA

A few months ago, Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot was calling Switch "fantastic", yet his company's initial commitment to it tells a different story. Compared to *Just Dance 17* and a remake of the three-and-a-half-year-old *Rayman Legends*, *Steep* is the star of Ubisoft's Switch offering, and will be updated after release with slopes of Alaska.



ULTRA STREET FIGHTER II: THE FINAL CHALLENGERS

Developer/publisher Capcom
Origin Japan **Release** TBA

While Capcom pitches this as a return to a SNES classic, this is actually a reprise of 2008 XBLA remake *Super SFII Turbo HD Remix*. With two new characters, online play, the cooperative Dramatic Battle and a briefly teased firstperson mode, it's a generous package, but the £35 pricetag seems optimistic on Capcom's part.



FIFA

Developer/publisher Electronic Arts
Origin TBA **Release** 2017

The rumour-mongers had a great time with this, announced by EA suit Patrick Soderlund as being 'custom-made' for Switch. That, allegedly, means it will be based on the series' ageing 360/PS3 version. Elsewhere, chatter suggests this exists due to a licensing stipulation that requires EA to make a *FIFA* game for every available console.



HAS-BEEN HEROES

Developer Frozenbyte **Publisher** Gametrust
Origin Finland **Release** March

Trine developer Frozenbyte is changing tack, tone and visual style in this multiplatform release. *Has-Been Heroes* retains *Trine*'s three-character setup, but employs them in a three-lane strategy game that borrows from both realtime and turn-based games, with a hefty dose of Roguelikes – death comes instantly, and is permanent.



SUPER BOMBERMAN R

Developer Konami, Hexadrive **Publisher** Konami
Origin Japan **Release** Mar 3

Members of the original *Bomberman* team are working on this, and boy does it show. This is largely *Super Bomberman* as you remember it, albeit rendered in 3D rather than on flat 2D backdrops, and with wirelessly connected Joy-Cons helping us get over the old recurring nightmare involving cables and multitaps. ▶













ABOVE LEFT **The Joy-Con dock, which you'll use when the Switch is in TV mode, doesn't charge controllers while you play – you'll need a £30 accessory for that.** BELOW **The Pro controller adopts a partially translucent design, and includes gyroscope technology for motion support**







The Switch's Joy-Con controllers are packed with inputs. While a necessary design given the way they can be shared between two players, this is a far cry from the minimalist, accessible design of the Wii Remote. 1 ZL button. 2 L button. 3 The Minus button, which lets the user pause the game in twoplayer mode. 4 Left stick. 5 SL button. 6 Player LED. 7 Directional buttons, which mimic a D-pad in singleplayer mode and face buttons in multiplayer. 8 Sync button. 9 Capture button, for taking screenshots. 10 SR button. 11 ZR button. 12 R button. 13 Plus button. 14 SR button. 15 A, B, X and Y face buttons. 16 Right stick. 17 SL button. 18 The Home button doubles up as an NFC reader for Amiibo support. 19 An infrared motion camera, which can detect simple hand motions (Nintendo showed it being used for a game of rock, paper, scissors) and will be able to record full video in future





Before Nintendo decided to bring *Breath Of The Wild* to Switch, Aonuma and team planned to use touchscreen controls extensively. "At first, the development team were a bit miffed," he says. "'We're going to have to redo it all!' But once we had changed the controls, we were happier. We think [the new] controls are better"

Q&A: EIJI AONUMA

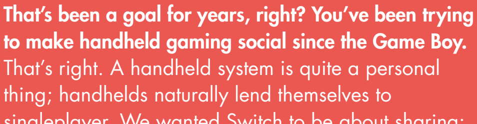
Eiji Aonuma is one of the most important people at Nintendo. As a senior member of creative staff, he's been involved in the design of Switch since the concept was in its infancy. And as producer of *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, he's helmed development on a game that is both the star of Switch's launch lineup and Wii U's software swansong. Here, he reflects on Switch's development, on the reception to its unveiling, and on why it always seems to fall to him to make a game for two generations of hardware.

How does making *Breath Of The Wild* for Switch and Wii U compare to your experience of making *Twilight Princess* across GameCube and Wii?
With *Twilight Princess*, the hardware was very similar, so there weren't many problems. This time, comparing Wii U to Nintendo Switch, the hardware is completely different in terms of structure and functionality. So we thought that we might encounter some difficulties there, but actually the programmers said it was easy. One area where we had to put a lot of effort in was the controls. We wanted to make use of the touchscreen functionality of the GamePad for the Wii U version; for the Switch version, we needed to consolidate that down into a one-screen display. That required a lot of effort.

Do your bosses see you as the guy they call when they need a game made for two generations of hardware?
I don't really think I'm thought of that way within Nintendo! *Zelda* is an extremely popular franchise, and one that, when we have a new system, we know will grab people's attention. In an ideal world, as a developer, I would look forward to carefully planning and creating a game that I could focus on just developing for one platform. I'd love to do that in the future, maybe for Nintendo Switch.

You were involved in Switch's development from very early on. How did it evolve from the initial concept?
It started from the core concept of being able to play the game on the TV, then just pick it up and take it with you and continue to play. That core concept really was there from day one. The smaller and more detailed aspects like the Joy-Con were added during the process, but even the idea of having the Joy-Con slot into the sides was there from a very early stage. In terms of the development of the hardware it's been, conceptually at least, quite smooth, and not much has changed from the original idea.

The final product packs in plenty of Nintendo innovations from down the years. Portability aside, what do you think is its most important feature?
I think a very important point about the Switch is tabletop mode – being able to set up a local multiplayer game wherever you are.



That's been a goal for years, right? You've been trying to make handheld gaming social since the Game Boy.
That's right. A handheld system is quite a personal thing; handhelds naturally lend themselves to singleplayer. We wanted Switch to be about sharing: you can take not just the singleplayer experience out of the living room, but the multiplayer experience as well. That's really important for us, and something we've wanted to achieve [for a long time].

"I'M NOT OVERLY WORRIED BY ANY NEGATIVE REACTION, BECAUSE I'M CONVINCED THAT OVER TIME IT CAN BE CONVERTED TO POSITIVITY"

The reception at the Switch event was largely positive among people who had hands-on opportunities, but there's a lot of concern over the price, both of hardware and software, and the release slate. What's your response to those sentiments?
There will always be negative reaction to anything that you do in life. With Switch, the people that are getting it in their hands understand its appeal, and how good it is. Personally I'm not overly worried by any negative reaction that might have come out, because I'm convinced that over time it can be converted to positivity, when more people have had the chance to play with the hardware and see what it can do.

How about speeding up development processes? Does the Switch architecture mean you can unify your handheld and console software teams, enabling you to get games out more quickly?
There's an element of that, but it doesn't automatically mean things will happen more quickly or more easily. Plus, Nintendo 3DS still has plenty of titles in development. The concept of the Switch is that you have a home console that you can take with you on the go, and in that respect it is both home console and handheld, but it doesn't mean for us that the concept of a dedicated handheld will just disappear. ■

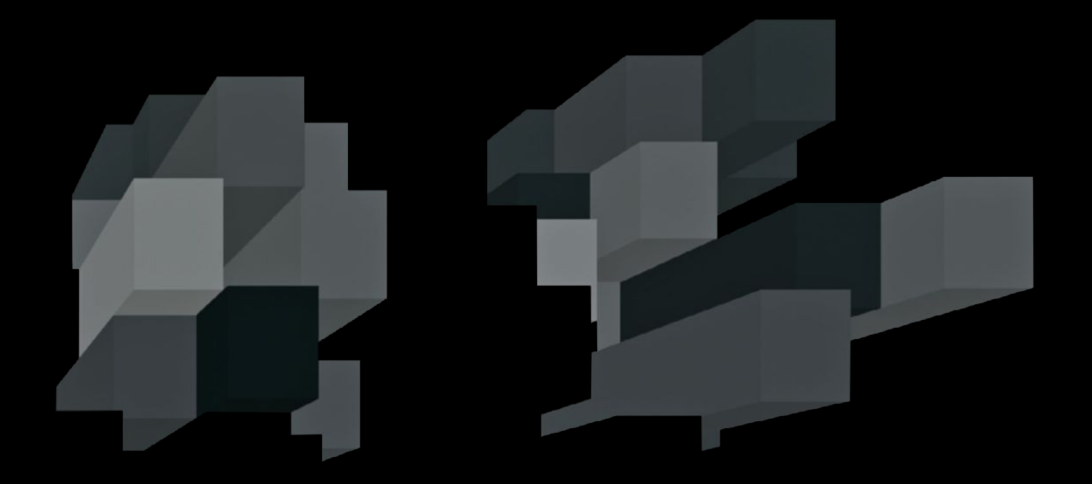


Eiji Aonuma, series producer for *The Legend Of Zelda*

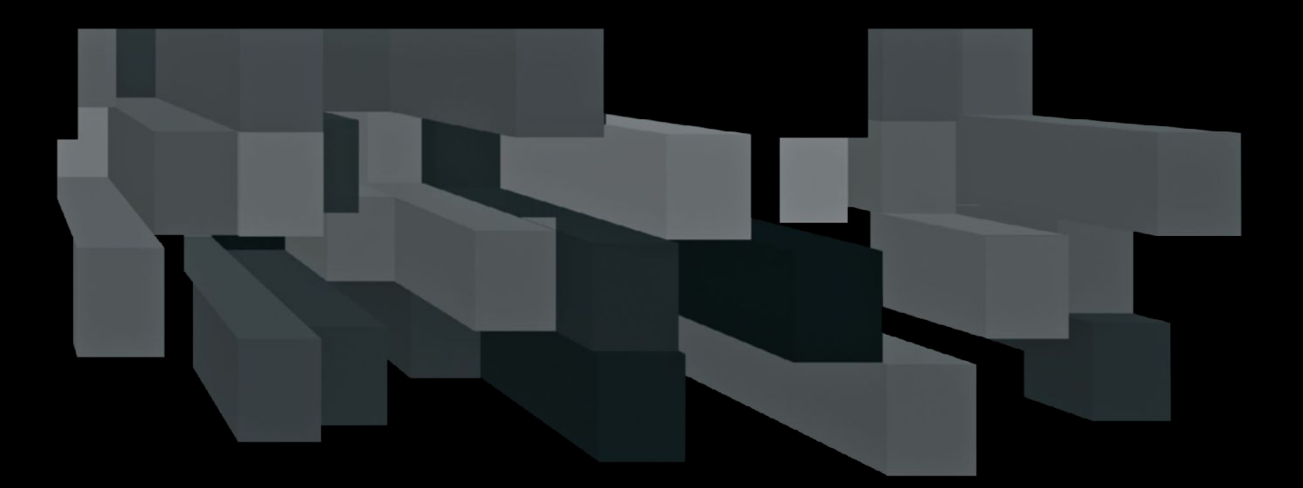




Game *Nex Machina*
Developer/publisher Housemarque
Format PS4
Release 2017



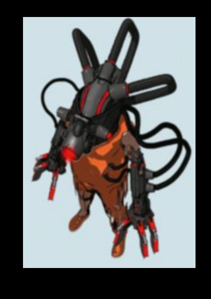
VOXEL PERFECT



After riffing on Defender, the Resogun team joins forces with Eugene Jarvis to take on Robotron

BY BEN MAXWELL

▶





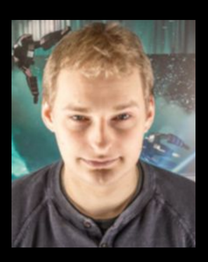
Housemarque's head of publishing, Mikael Haveri



Co-creator of *Defender* and *Robotron* – and Raw Thrills co-founder – Eugene Jarvis



Nex Machina game director Harry Krueger



Nex Machina producer Jari Kantomaa

Resogun's popularity caught Housemarque on the hop. The team had run a brief press tour in the US, but the game – a side-scrolling shooter in which you must juggle hundreds of enemies with the need to rescue humans from their alien oppressors – had received little publicity prior to its release alongside the PlayStation 4 launch. "We came downstairs the first morning the Metacritic scores were out, and realised *Resogun* was on top of that list," head of publishing **Mikael Haveri** tells us. "That's when it hit us that, OK, a *Defender* clone *can* still be a relevant game."

The game's success led to a nomination for the 2014 DICE awards, which, fortuitously, happened to be the same year *Defender* creator **Eugene Jarvis** was in attendance to receive his Academy Of Interactive Arts & Sciences Pioneer Award. In the celebrations that followed, the Housemarque developers found themselves in the Hard Rock Cafe with Jarvis in the early hours of the morning. "We started chatting, and said, 'What if we did something together?'" Haveri recalls. "He was sort of aware of us, but wasn't really a hardcore fan or anything. Anyway, he [went home], got *Resogun*, and called us the same week to say, 'I've never really followed up on anybody's enquiries about making a game together before, but I want to do something with you guys.' So that was how it started."

"The team was just so passionate," Jarvis tells us. "A lot of games are more about execution than the actual idea: you can have the greatest idea in the world, but if it's executed poorly, it's horrendous. So if you have a passionate team that can execute at a really high level, then the odds are much higher that something really fun can happen."

Given that the *Resogun* team was now in cahoots with Jarvis, and had already tackled *Defender*, the coalition's thoughts naturally

Nex Machina's arenas quickly become crowded as wave after wave of enemies teleport in and immediately give chase

turned to another of Jarvis's classics: *Robotron: 2084*. In fact, that game had played an important role in *Resogun*'s development, too. "I've always been a fan of *Robotron*," says game director **Harry Krueger**. "It's the epitome of pure arcade action and gameplay. When when we were making *Resogun*, I remember we used to go back to *Robotron* every now and then, just to get in touch with the basics. Because it's easy to lose perspective during development sometimes, so it was really refreshing to go back to this distilled arcade experience and see what kind of intensity it brought to the table, and how we could replicate that." With *Nex Machina*, Krueger and his team are aiming to recreate the claustrophobic, twin-stick intensity of *Robotron*. But, like *Resogun*, it's far from a simple homage. The controls are beautifully simple, however: left stick to move, right stick to fire, L1 to dash and R1 to fire your secondary weapon. That's it. Levels take place on giant floating platforms, and you move between each tightly enclosed arena when you clear the space of enemies (if you can rescue some or all of the humans in the process, all the better). Sometimes that transition sees you topple over onto a different side of the cuboid structure you're standing on, gravity be damned. Enemies are relentless, running with alarming speed straight towards you from the off; laser beams must be dashed through; and boxes containing temporary powerups – a shotgun with finite ammo, for example, or a rocket launcher – are squirrelled away in strategically foolhardy corners.

"IT'S EASY TO LOSE PERSPECTIVE, SO IT WAS REALLY REFRESHING TO GO BACK TO THIS DISTILLED ARCADE EXPERIENCE"



Housemarque has experimented with a number of setups, but in the current version your main gun can be upgraded from single shot to double, triple and so on, while secondary weapons provide greater firing power and wider areas of effect. "Nothing is final," Haveri stresses. "The launch version might be very different. I think right now we have a fairly good core formula, because it means the player has choice in terms of strategy throughout the levels, while there's still some kind of a stacking element in play. We wanted to go minimalistic – pretty much the opposite of *Alienation*. We didn't want to have character development or levels or so on – we needed to have something that's much more pick-up-and-play. What's a key differentiating factor here is that we wanted to have two active buttons, because in our minds we're making an arcade-cabinet game."

That sentiment isn't simply an analogy: there's a very real prospect that the game will also exist as a coin-op via Jarvis's company Raw Thrills. At this stage, the viability of that plan isn't fully worked out, but the foundations for it are already being laid. New joysticks will have to be developed (or, at least, adapted), and funding will have to be found. Housemarque is considering crowdfunding ▶

HUD TO NOTICE

While Housemarque takes pride in its gameplay-first philosophy, another important aspect of any fast-paced shooter is its UI. "In *Nex*, the aim is for the HUD to be something that you get all of the information from, but won't necessarily even remember what it looked like afterwards because it's so integrated with the whole experience," explains **Rudolf Westerholm**, who is both media manager and UI designer. "We really have to be able to keep things really, really simplistic. We really try to think about all the effects during gameplay, and the way the colours of the UI contrast with the enemies and backgrounds, so that the player will always know what's happening."





SCRIPT EDITOR

Though *Robotron: 2084* is celebrated for its simplicity, Eugene Jarvis and co-designer Larry DeMar had more expansive plans for the game while developing it. "The original document for *Robotron* was actually this massive maze of rooms and stuff that you had to explore to eventually conquer your way into the master-brain area, or whatever," Jarvis recalls. "That was really cool, but the first implementation was, 'Lets take some crap, put you on a screen, and throw a bunch of shit around you, then see how that feels.' And it was like, 'Hey, that was pretty fun! Maybe we don't need this huge scenario! We'll just throw some random crap up!' [Laughs] This whole maze that I was going to be designing for years, I was just like, 'Screw that, man – the game makes money!'

the project to get it off the ground, but manufacturing to scale would require the production of at least 100 units, which is a tall order in such a volatile market.

"I just really feel that there's an opportunity there for us to make a bit of a statement," Krueger muses. "It's the physical manifestation of all our cumulative design philosophy, in a way – all of those years of iterating over arcade games, both for Eugene and us, have culminated in this one moment, and a *Nex Machina* arcade cabinet would be the ultimate result of that, somehow. And, of course, I'm looking forward to having one in my living room. I don't know where I'm going to put it – we might need to get rid of a couch or something – but who cares!"

Irrespective of whether the cabinet eventually emerges, *Nex Machina*'s arcade spirit isn't in question. "The cool thing about *Nex Machina* is that we've really got the dynamic down with the confinement, but you still have this greater world that you can explore," Jarvis says. "I think that's a really important thing in design sometimes – to try the minimal thing and then stop once the game is cool and fun. *Nex Machina* is a bottom-up design – it's about getting something playable, seeing how it feels, and then moving forward from there. As opposed to some incredible 400-page script that completely defines a game before anyone plays anything, [where] you work for four years before the thing is playable, and then you finally power it up and it's like, 'OK, is it fun?'

"To make a great game, you have to keep playing it. It's all about tweaking it, the speed of everything, and getting it to a human scale that just feels right to the player. There has to be some sweaty palms, y'know? 'Oh my god, look at what's going on! I should have been dead five minutes ago!' You get that overload and just can't believe what's happening."

"ALL OF THOSE YEARS OF ITERATING OVER ARCADE GAMES HAVE CULMINATED IN THIS ONE MOMENT"

Although *Nex Machina* still has a good stretch of development and iteration ahead of it, it already feels confidently polished, and exudes *Resogun*'s heady cocktail of ostensibly insurmountable odds, simple controls that are responsive enough to let you glaze over slightly and get into the zone, and a bombardment of colours, particles and visual effects that seem to spill from the screen.

"You could say that *Nex Machina* shares the same design philosophy as *Resogun*," Krueger explains. "You'll see a lot of the same strands of DNA in the two games. The over-the-top audio visual feedback, lots of explosions per second, bright colours, clear, vivid feedback, and overall a really satisfying, quite simple and immediate experience for the player."

***Nex Machina* is** powered by a significantly reworked version of the engine behind *Resogun*, however, and while the game also places cascading voxels front and centre, the development team now has far greater flexibility in terms of how those objects appear onscreen thanks to a volumetric rendering technique known as Signed Distance Fields (SDF). Whereas *Resogun*'s levels and ships were built from thousands of cubes, SDF allows Housemarque to smoothly transition between complex 3D meshes and voxel particles – which can, in turn, be distorted into new shapes.

"It's basically raytracing the scene, and it allows you to transform the scene in realtime," producer **Jari Kantomaa** explains. "We can add holes or new geometry, or new elements into the scene. Imagine a mole tunnelling



underground: it will distort the ground. We can just explode parts of the level and create holes wherever we want. And we can morph a lot of things. You see these cubes that become a little more rounded, and when explosions happen there are ripple effects, which come from the morphing tech."

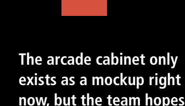
"When you're watching those explosions it's almost like watching waves crashing onto rocks, or a turbulent waterfall," Jarvis notes. "These wave effects within all these particles – it's really quite soothing! If you can stay alive long enough…"

Like *Nex Machina's* players, Housemarque is also hurling itself into a vulnerable position. For the past nine years the majority of the studio's projects have been published and funded by Sony Interactive Entertainment, and those that weren't were supported by other major publishers. *Nex Machina* will be the studio's first self-published game.

"That actually stems from the fact that we had an opportunity to work with Eugene and weren't willing to go through the process of making that OK with any of our current partners," Haveri explains. "So we felt it might be easier just to take the risk on our own. We do now have support from large partners, and Sony's very integrated into it, but not in the same way that they have been with other projects. So we're travelling down a bit of a different path because there's more of our personal money at stake, and we're hedging our bets to make this happen."

Given the hype currently surrounding the project, and the enduring appetite for

Giant bosses feature, of course, including Beamtron, an imposing sphere that spits out laser beams and bullets



The arcade cabinet only exists as a mockup right now, but the team hopes to make it a reality



Housemarque's high-calibre twin-stick shooters, it's difficult to imagine *Nex Machina* being anything other than a success. Indeed, the team feels like it couldn't be in a better position than it is right now.

"This is the first project on which I've been assigned the role of game director, so no pressure," Krueger laughs. "I have been given this key role in the project, so it does feel like, you know, my baby in many ways. We have a fantastic team working on it, we have the creator of the original *Robotron* on our side, it's self-published – it just feels like we have everything aligned in the best possible way to make this another great addition to the Housemarque portfolio."

The game went down well at December's PSX, with long queues snaking out of the game's booth on both days of the event. There's still some distance left to go, but *Nex Machina* is now on track to become a vivid successor to the astonishing, enduring *Resogun*.

"After a couple of years of struggling, we really had a breakthrough at PSX," Jarvis says. "You can have 900 good ideas and the result is still bad. But you have 903 good ideas and all of sudden it's a game. So I really feel like we're at a good point now. We need to [work on] multiplayer as it's a more social world today – we're less isolated than 40 years ago with our pixels. As developers we can get all excited, but after a while we can get so convinced that we're so brilliant that we might get excited about almost anything. So you have to get a game out there with the players and then see their reactions as they play. And that's just magic." ■

NEXT MACHINA

Resogun has expanded significantly in the years since the game's release, the slick shooter gaining a raft of new modes, weekly challenges and a ship editor, among other things. Housemarque hopes that *Nex Machina* will have a similarly long life. "We're looking into a lot of things that maybe aren't available in a traditional publishing model, or at least aren't as efficient," Haveri explains. "So, instead of, for example, DLC models, we'd like to do an update system where we can really listen to the audience and create content that they actually want to pay for."



Q & A

EUGENE JARVIS Co-founder, Raw Thrills

Eugene Jarvis, along with Larry DeMar, is the co-creator of arcade classics *Defender* and *Robotron: 2084*. He also designed *Smash TV* – a spiritual successor to *Robotron* – with Mark Turmell, and is responsible for the *Cruis'n* racing series, which he has recently updated with a new cabinet – *Cruis'n Blast* – created by Raw Thrills, the arcade-game company he co-founded in 2001.



You've turned down a number of developers who've approached you to work with them on projects – why was *Nex Machina* different?

I think there are some wonderful game mechanics in some of the classics, and to revisit those titles now and then can be fun. But it's really tough, because you have a game that works so well in 2D, and there's always this huge risk when you try to bring that into 3D. It's like 3D chess – as wonderful as it is in 2D, when you bring in another dimension, your brain explodes. But *Robotron* is the game that I did which I think probably has the most staying power. There's a simplicity to the game but also incredible depth. We revisited it in *Smash TV* years ago, and it's been over 30 years since the original, so I thought maybe it was time. I just thought, 'Why not? Let's give it a shot,' you know? Plus I was really excited about *Resogun*. It's a really fun game, and I loved the particle effects – which was something I got really excited about years ago on *Defender*. But in *Resogun* it was, like, to the tenth power!





***Nex Machina* certainly dials up that aspect.**

Yeah. Listen, I remember when I first saw *Minecraft*, I thought, 'How can people get excited about this old, crappy technology?' We've been trying to get rid of these big pixels and voxels for the past 40 years. My entire career was dedicated to getting rid of this shit and having smooth, organic shapes, and now all of a sudden it's cool again. My 15-year-old kid is like, 'This is the coolest shit,' and I'm like, 'Dude. That was cool in 1982.' But the coolest thing about what Housemarque has done with their voxel technology is that it can morph back and forth between a smooth, shaded mesh and a voxel, interpolating between two different objects. You get the best of both worlds. Not everything is *Minecraft* block stuff – you also have these very ornate and smooth-shaded, incredible enemies. Then when you blow them up they go into this voxel state and scatter. There's got to be thousands of voxels onscreen flying everywhere.

"MY ENTIRE CAREER WAS DEDICATED TO GETTING RID OF THIS SHIT, AND NOW ALL OF A SUDDEN IT'S COOL AGAIN"

Are you surprised at the continued appetite for games built on the ideas that you and your peers laid out three decades ago?

I mean, it's obviously a good ego stroke, you know. But back in that day we were kind of the formation of the industry. We were dealing with the most basic stuff and creating some basic genres – now there are hundreds of them. If I hadn't been there, somebody else would've done it. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen, because there are just way too many smart people out in the world. I think we can get a little high on our own egos by thinking that we're indispensable, which is not true at all.

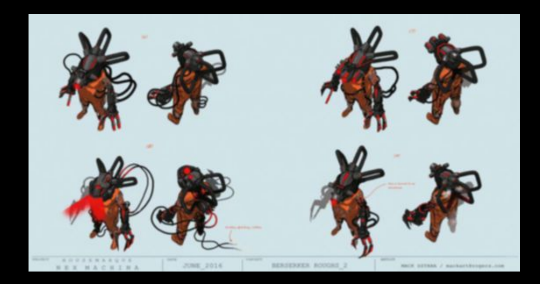
Over the years we've had some great



Robotron-type games. The whole dual-stick thing was pretty obvious, but it was amazing how many years it took to become the standard. I remember making *Robotron* in 1982 and being like, 'Who would make a game without [dual sticks]?' And then for the next ten or 15 years we had basically the Nintendo NES controller. And I was like, 'Wow, don't you guys know you can put two joysticks together?' I guess they were right, though, because *Mario* was a much bigger game [laughs].

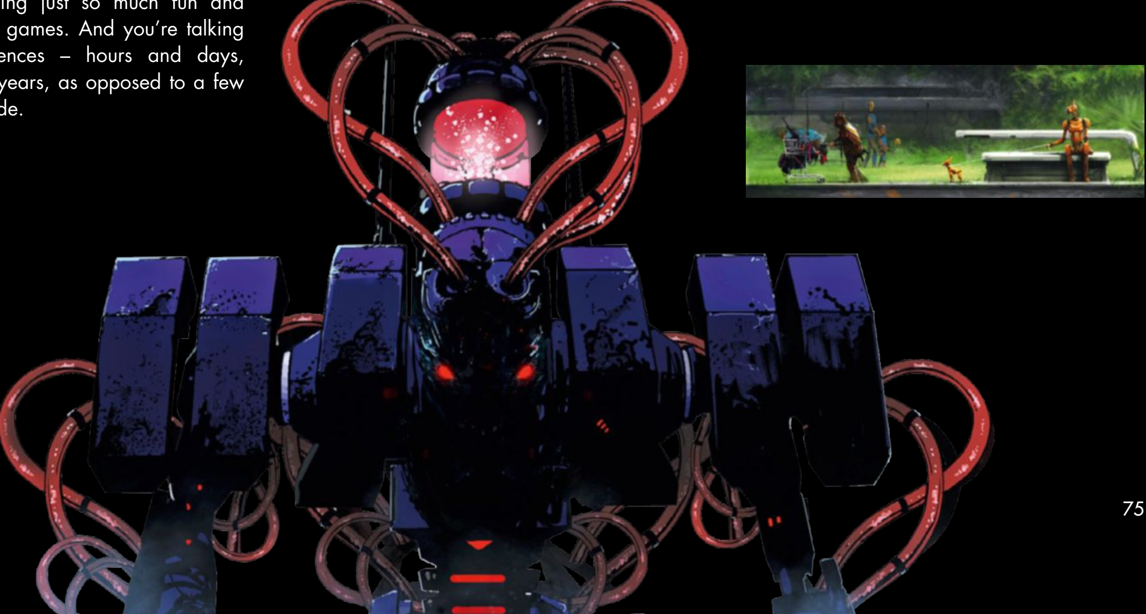
How does it feel to be working on a console game again after spending such a long time focused squarely on the arcade scene?
In some ways it's extremely humbling. The arcade world is a fun one, but it's a small world these days – a niche market. We have a tremendous amount of fun, and we can create these really cool, huge games and play around with things like putting 4,000 LEDs – or 100,000, whatever! – on a cabinet. And we can create these huge experiences where you walk into an arcade and go, 'Oh my god, look at that thing!' That's really cool, but then you get into the world of PlayStation and it's a very hardcore audience. These are players that live and breathe games. They're playing games 22/7, with two hours of sleep and just this crazy passion. They're fanatics.

It reminds me of back in the day when the arcade was king and we had people that just lived in there. That was their whole life – the arcades would be open all night, until 6am, and people would just play through the night. I don't know when they slept. You can see that same hardcore audience on PS4 – crazy people having just so much fun and getting so into the games. And you're talking very long experiences – hours and days, maybe months or years, as opposed to a few minutes in an arcade.



But that hasn't stopped you planning to create a cabinet version of *Nex Machina*?
I think we can get some made. Analogue sticks aren't common today, but I think we can take some of the flight-stick technology and adapt it. I always love physical cabinets – being able to grab hold of the cabinet and shake it, like going up to your best frenemy and grabbing them by the neck. It's this real physical anger and emotion – you can just dig in more. It's kind of like you against the machine. I love that feeling of grabbing a big joystick. And one in each hand is just so balanced.

I don't know if we'll be able to do it, but some day I would love to have ten players at once, on a 30-foot screen – which is probably not too far off – and have this mega experience, live in meatspace. Ten people in the same room very physically playing with joysticks as opposed to WASD keys. When I look at esports, I have a hard time getting super-excited about watching someone playing around with their keyboard. We're just lacking physicality there; we're just becoming brains. But we're people – we should be out there physically going after stuff. ■





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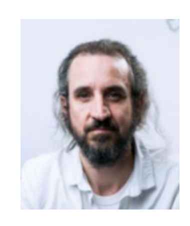
BARRY MEADE

Success in mobile games? To the co-founder of Fireproof, it's all about going with your gut

By Ben Maxwell

Photography **Adam Gasson**





CV

In typically idiosyncratic fashion, Barry Meade entered the videogame industry in 1992 as an artist and animator working on 'healthutainment' games for PC, Amiga and SNES. Two years later, he joined Bullfrog Productions in the same role, but had established himself as head of level design by the time he left in 1996. Over the next five years Meade worked as a designer for various studios, including Mucky Foot Productions, before taking some time out to teach himself 3DS Max. Armed with new skills, he returned to his artistic roots and in 2003 joined *Burnout* studio Criterion. A little over five years later, Meade and five colleagues left the studio to found Fireproof Games, initially establishing it as a work-for-hire studio before releasing debut title *The Room* in 2012.

The rise of smartphones and tablets promised a jolt of innovation for the videogame industry, but while there has been much to celebrate along the way, the devaluing influence of free-to-play, and severe discoverability problems, have led to stagnation. One company whose work consistently cuts through this creative enervation is Fireproof Games, the developer behind *The Room* series, which has sold around 12m copies to date. Here, director and co-founder **Barry Meade** reflects on the studio's huge success, the state of the mobile-game industry today, and why artistry and passion still trump metrics.

Let's start at the beginning, in 2008: what were the origins of Fireproof?

We started as an outsourcing company, making artwork for other people's games, basically, so we were just six freelancers. And the way we established the business then was to be as cheap as possible, literally to only earn our running costs, and make our work as good as possible, so people could see that we were competitive. We knew that we were professional enough, I guess, from our backgrounds, and we could do good work. So if we went in really cheap, we could win some contracts. That's how we started, and it's pretty much how we continued. It's also why we never made any money from that model [laughs]. But we were more concerned with being really good and staying in work than we were in trying to make a huge business out of it. But the long-term goal was always really important to us as well, because it helped us not to try and turn into an outsourcing business. We didn't want to become 100 freelancers knocking out lampposts for people. Our future business was always going to be, "We have to make our own videogames."

How do you think that outlook set Fireproof apart?

Having that in mind allowed us to make those short-term decisions, or rather decisions about our short-term makeup. We didn't agonise over things. If we got a contract that was too big for us, we said no, rather than desperately scrambling to make it work and hiring people left and right. I think a lot of people in our position didn't do that – they took every contract they could, and hired anyone they could in order to get as much work as possible. I think that's a natural reaction, but we went the other way. We wanted to stay as small as possible.

Is going against the grain something that was already in you, or was it a conscious effort to work that way?

It was a combination of our experience and also how we wanted things to be. Working with EA and Criterion, it was the best of times, and the worst of times. We got to make wonderful games and work with wonderful people, but it was tremendously difficult and we worked our arses off, in an unsustainable way. People shouldn't have to work like that, or even work with those methods. So we came out of Criterion with some very strong opinions about what works and what doesn't, and what's right and what isn't, and what is healthy and what is unhealthy. An awful lot of the practices that are put in place in huge offices are actually to train people, to get them into the swing of doing things a certain way. But if you've been doing it ten, 15, 20 years – over 20, in my case – you don't need that any more. Those regimes don't help – they just get in your way and cause you pain. They cause you worry and they cost you time. You burn so much time trying to manage upwards and outwards, justifying your work and your decisions, and getting measured by the producers – that situation is just managed chaos.

What sort of practical changes did you make?

We know what we're doing, we know why we're doing it, we know how much it's going to cost, we know how much we're going to make out of it, we know how long it should take... So all of the strictures that we would have placed upon ourselves have no place here at all. When we came out of Criterion we were naturally in the position of, "Let's remove all of the bullshit from the working day that the industry has" – all the things that we had to go through and that we know don't work, and that we never want to go back to. We wanted to look at Fireproof as a blank slate, work exactly how we want to and build it up from there. As far as industry decisions, or the business decisions we've made, I think that's probably just an extension of that. We've always made decisions based upon what feels right, not what will make us the most money or anything like that.

Last year you released a detailed infographic that revealed how much each instalment of *The Room* cost to create, along with your returns. What was the impetus behind making that public?

We released the first one after *The Room 2*, and just updated it after *The Room 3*. But when we started, we were trying to learn about mobile and checking out the platform and the industry and how that all worked. But we couldn't find any information from any company about the market. No one was releasing figures at the time. How much does a number-one premium game sell? We've no idea. How much does it make? We've no idea. How much do they cost? No idea. People have this thing in their head that what they're doing is tremendously important and so they can't tell people about it, when in fact no one cares. It's not that important. You're not that important. Why are you worried about it? Exactly what's going to happen to you if this information gets out?

"WE DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE AUDIENCE WANTS. WE WANT TO GIVE THEM SOMETHING THEY HAVEN'T SEEN"



The Room **series' intricate puzzle boxes and mechanisms are a perfect match for touchscreens, encouraging tactile exploration and making interacting with them particularly moreish. The series also benefits from its imposingly dark atmosphere – a result of the studio's prior experimentation with a horror concept**

Probably nothing. So we wanted other teams in our position, who have no money, no resources and fuck-all contacts, with nobody pushing them, to be able to have some information. Just something that they can base maybe a *few* decisions on. It was just us acknowledging that when we were really looking for the information it wasn't there. So we always had this idea that if we were ever successful we would release that information for people so that they would know.

You've collected and published that data, but how much do you care about the metrics that have become such a focus in mobile development and publishing?
Not at all. It's a function of the kind of games that they're making, though, right? If you're making a free-to-play game, you need to know all that stuff, because all your competitors have it, and they're all using it. All that stuff in the right situation makes a lot of sense. But I would say that even there, they probably overdo it – they overthink it. I know so many people who put blood, sweat and tears into their game and it still fails anyway. There's an over-reliance on people thinking that this stuff is science, that if you use this stuff it means success. That's the issue I have with using data: it's not that the data itself is wrong, or it doesn't inform you, it's what it leads people to conclude. Data will tell you that the only thing people like is *Clash Of Clans*. There's literally only one game that can be made on mobile? Really? It's not sensible to believe that. And yet the industry does – if you go and speak to them, that's all they really want.

And yet games such as *The Room* prove that it isn't really the case, right?
It's changing slowly. Free-to-play games have always been getting better, and people are going the other way now, because that top-ten grossing [chart] is a really hard mountain to climb. And so people are looking for different ways to make money and they're probably beginning to look at designs that maybe they wouldn't have done before. Innovation is happening, but as far as the data stuff is going, it just depends on your game. We happen to be making paid games that don't require it at all, but people are still surprised that we don't use it for *something* – like to follow up on how our users play our games, for example.

That aspect at least seems like it could be useful.
No, that stuff is just not interesting. I know that there are developers out there that will test 100 icons before publishing their icon. That kind of stuff – that to us now is someone who doesn't know what they're doing. Either that, or they've been so brow-beaten by the data that they've lost confidence in their own decision-making. It's one way to do it, and it is a scientific way to do it – test 100 different icons, with 1,000 people, and see which one is clicked on the most, or whatever. But we would just see that as a minor, tiny extension of a million decisions we make every day without any input from anywhere else. A minor thing that wouldn't even exercise half an hour of our time; rather than testing 100, we just make one and make it look nice. We don't want to know what the audience wants. We want to give them something they haven't seen. It's not important for us to find out what they already like, because that's not where we're going with it. And as far as we're concerned, if you want to be successful, you have to think like that. So you should be putting this other stuff away, and letting generic developers who are never really going to make anything good run up that tree. That's not your job – your job is to surprise people, and to make them like something that they didn't know that they liked.

Do you think that's why *The Room* was a success?
To be honest, I'm not sure that it was, in comparison to other paid games. We released *The Room* in 2012, and it was a simpler time then. Granted, it was even simpler in 2009 and 2010 when *Cut The Rope* and all these other games were literally selling ten or 20 million, but that was an eon ago. No one's ever going to go back there on paid – well, unless paid gets some kind of resurgence. But ▶



the glamour was already gone from paid by the time we released our game and everyone had gone free-to-play. We're motivated by making lots of money, but we're not that motivated. We want a good life, and we want to go home to our kids every day. We have money now, so we're not at all motivated to go out and make 100 million dollars, because we've made ten [million]. We haven't really changed our attitude now that we're successful. It gives us a lot of confidence, but it's a hard attitude to have because the attitude is, our work has to be world-class; we have to compete with the best that are out there, not just other indie teams. We have to compete with everybody, because that's the marketplace. But as for why *The Room* worked? Well, first of all, the reason it got known when it was released was because it was pushed on the App Store – we got the Editor's Choice that week, and that's a huge deal. But once that is gone, there's no impetus there to keep a game selling, to keep it in the charts and keep people talking about it. That's where a huge amount of your success will come from, and we managed to do that. The game is still selling – in much lower numbers, obviously, but it still sells every day. That's down to people just liking the game. We've never spent a cent on advertising or PR in the history of the company. We've had a week of featuring on launch, and that's it. We've managed to sell over ten million games that way, so there's definitely something about the game that appeals to people. If you wanted to say it simply, I just think it's that there wasn't another game like *The Room* when it came out. It's that simple.

Hindsight gives one perspective, but how risky did it feel in the run up to the first game's release?

To us, that's the fucking job. That's what we're all supposed to be doing. You're not supposed to look like the next guy over there – that's what the mediocre people in the industry tell you [to do]. These are the people that don't really believe in success. I'm sure if you walked into an average publisher, they're just not really going to think you're capable of selling ten million copies, or 20 million, or 30. It's not how they think. They're numbers people, and they're like, "Pfft, yeah, no one sells that, so..." You know? They're not motivated by the quality of the game, so if you show them an amazing game, but you're making it as a paid game, they're just going to tell you it's not going to work. I think that's something that maybe we've lost in the industry – the idea that we're supposed to make people believe in magic with a videogame. You're supposed to lift them, or take them somewhere else, or get them invested in this world that they find really interesting. And I think in mobile games that's just been whittled down. I can't prove this, but my gut feeling is that data has made people turn it into a process, because the problem with data is that once you engage with it and say, "I'm accepting what it says," you can't argue with it. I think it's very difficult for new ideas to get expressed, or different ways of thinking to come up in a natural way, because the industry is bending all the developers in one direction, all of the time. It's relentless. I think that's basically meant that mobile is just a more boring platform for games than its size would suggest, than its userbase would suggest, than its hardware would suggest, I would say. It makes a shit-ton of money with games that are not very good, generally.

How much impact do you think that has on games that take other approaches?

If you count the amount of amazing games on mobile, there's so many. But if you count the amount of amazing games that really do well on mobile, there's hardly any of them. Free-to-play is the most active [sector], but given the fact that one-and-a-half billion, two billion people own these devices, everything should be way, way bigger, especially the paid market. And it totally isn't. The

constant refrain you hear from the industry is, "Well, people prefer free-to-play," and what they mean is, "People prefer free." They add the "-to-play" bit afterwards, but actually this is why free wins, this is why free has always won, and this is why it always will win. As soon as it arrived, it just beat everything. But the other reason it won is because the industry beat a path to it once they saw someone making tons of cash. Everyone was struggling with mobile at the time, if you remember – no one could figure mobile out, and people were releasing ten-million-dollar clangers. They were doing really bad ports from PC, and there were virtual D-pad games everywhere – they were all bad. There was so much bad that when good ones came along they were seen as dumb or stupid, like *Cut The Rope* and any of the stuff Epic did – there was a lot that was going on there that was true to the platform, that used the touchscreen really well, that took it seriously and built a game based around the hardware and around the platform. And that was something we really tried to do with *The Room*. But the industry never came back – they've just abandoned it now. They're making lots of money, so good for them, but unfortunately it has left a feeling that tiny studios like us are the only ones who still believe in paid games. People think we're making a mistake by doing this, but we're not stupid. It's like, "No, we know we're limiting our earning power, we know that we're not going to make as much money – your mistake is to think we don't realise this." We know we'll never be as rich as these people, but it doesn't bother us, because we're much more interested in making games – really good games that we believe in, that appeal to us, that we think we'll be remembered for. There's going to be so many games that made 50 or 100 million dollars on the App Store that no one will think about in five years' time. But there's going to be a lot of games that made five million that people will remember, and talk about. That's where we want to be.

What we find weird about the mobile industry is that they say that if you're not working with data, if you're not building a shop into the middle of your game, you don't care about money, you're not doing right by your staff, or something like this. So it's denying the relationship between amazing games and amazing money that has always been there from day one, and has driven the game industry for so long. The mentality in mobile games is that there are absolutes out there that are driving everything. Whereas we take the attitude that, no, the software we create dictates our success from now until the end of eternity. They should be innovating maddeningly right now, but they're not. Look at what's happening with King or Rovio – they have all the money in the world, and they can't make another game that's a hit. But SuperCell can. Why? Because for them the work is what matters most of all. They do everything that Rovio and King do, right? They market the shit out of everything, but they're like the Blizzard of free-to-play: they know their shit, and they know that it comes down to the quality of the game experience at the end of the day. The game experience on its own will generate you shit-tons of cash if it's really good. You don't need any other accoutrements or bolt-ons to please people more than your rivals are pleasing them. That to us seems very elementary, but in mobile it seems to be a bit forgotten, I would say. What's really true is that *Clash Of Clans* was the best mobile game on the planet when it came out, and that *Candy Crush Saga* is an amazing mobile game. But the data-guzzling side of the industry wants us to believe that it's actually more process-driven, and the reason they think that is because they don't have anything except money, so they want to believe that by spending money they will therefore get loads of success.

"UNFORTUNATELY IT HAS LEFT A FEELING THAT TINY STUDIOS LIKE US ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO STILL BELIEVE IN PAID GAMES"

What are your thoughts about Nintendo's entry into the paid mobile market, with *Super Mario Run*?

The way *Mario*'s being discussed has been really interesting because people cannot help themselves comparing paid and free-to-play games. This is something we're so used to seeing as Fireproof. People just don't get that we're not in the same market. Just because we're on the same platform they see it like we're in the same business, but that's totally not the case. We share nothing with free-to-play games. If you make a paid game, you have more in common with a paid game on a PS4 or PC, probably, than you have with any free-to-play game. We don't know anything about their business – we don't play their games – but whenever the press discuss paid games it's always in the context of, "Well, they're not really making much money, are they?" And we're sitting there going, "Well, our life has been fucking turned around by this, thank you very much. This is life-changing money for us – what the fuck are you talking about?" This is exactly what we hoped for. We planned for *this* to happen. ■



With each instalment of *The Room*, Fireproof has honed its ability to hide secrets in plain sight, and tell stories via the environment

THE MAKING OF...



MAFIA III

How a hand-picked band of developers created a unique open-world thriller

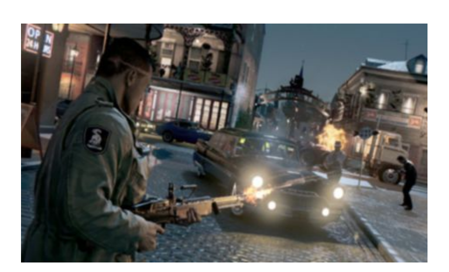
By Edward Smith

Developer Hangar 13, 2K Czech
Publisher 2K
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2016

On April 3, 2013, when LucasArts officially ceased operations, it seemed like the end of an era. Games such as *Monkey Island*, *Grim Fandango* and *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* had represented an industry standard for storytelling and characterisation, and with their creator now closed – and 150 writers, designers and programmers suddenly out of work – it felt as though quality narrative in videogames had suffered a huge blow. But **Haden Blackman**, who had left LucasArts some three years prior, had an idea. As the head of Hangar 13, a new studio created by publishing giant 2K, he saw in the closure of LucasArts the opportunity to build a new type of open-world game. Apart from Christoph Hartmann, 2K's president and the man who hired him, Blackman was the only person who knew what Hangar 13 was created to do. But with some of the best game-makers in the business now looking for jobs, it was the perfect time to share the secret. Blackman quickly started hiring the team that would develop *Mafia III*.

A quality thirdperson shooter. An exciting driving game. A story about ethnicity, violence and the American '60s. *Mafia III* had to be many things, so Blackman didn't restrict his recruitment to former LucasArts talent, with his team eventually comprising designers and writers from some of the biggest titles in the business. "When LucasArts wound down, it was local and I'd worked there for a long time, so that gave us a lot of people," Blackman says. "But we also started talking to some of the guys at 2K Czech, which had developed *Mafia II*, about ideas they'd already had for *Mafia III*. Some of them became part of Hangar 13's foundation. And we hired like crazy. I think we got people from every major franchise of the past decade."

One of the first arrivals at Hangar 13 was **Matthias Worch**, who'd previously worked on LucasArts' *Star Wars* games. As design director, he was responsible for laying out and designing the overall vision. But before anything could be built, the game's setting, time period and central character had to be decided. Dozens of questions – about Hangar 13's aspirations, the history of the *Mafia* franchise, and the state of contemporary open-world games – framed his early discussions. "We put a lot of work into working out what *Mafia* meant to us, and what



Hangar 13's priority was to create a thirdperson shooter that would work smoothly even in a chaotic environment

making games meant to us," Worch explains. "When you make a new team, you have to spend time deciding what kind of culture you want to create, so we had this big board detailing what areas of the game we wanted to attack. We created this motto: 'Every player story is unique'. But the industry didn't have a blueprint for how that could be achieved.

"WE HIRED LIKE CRAZY. I THINK WE GOT PEOPLE FROM EVERY MAJOR FRANCHISE OF THE PAST DECADE"

"So we posed this different set of questions, this holy trinity: what is the character, what is the time period, and what is the place? We started by saying it had to be in the '60s, because the second *Mafia* game was set in the '40s and '50s, so it ought to be a continuation. With that in mind, we looked at which American city was the major centre for crime in the period, which led us to New Orleans. And then we wanted a character who could say something about living in that place and in that time. That's where we got Lincoln Clay."

But even with an established franchise to draw upon, an intriguing concept and an enviable team of designers, Hangar 13 quickly discovered that making an open-world game presented a long list of challenges. Each feature, from the exploration to the shooting to the in-game economy, had to interconnect and communicate with all the others. An early test level, for example, which detailed a single gunfight at a marina, proved that shooting and cover mechanics worked in isolation. But when *Mafia III*'s action spilled into the sandbox world proper, with cars, pedestrians and other randomised elements, it started to come apart. Driving also required a lot of tweaking and iteration. Research trips to New Orleans yielded photographs and interviews, all of them invaluable for creating *Mafia III*'s story, but the city's streets were narrow and crowded, a problem for the fast-paced, action-packed driving Hangar 13 wanted to create. To get its vision up to speed, the studio had to take certain liberties with reality.

"We wanted to create a confident cover shooter in a fully systemic local world, which we didn't think had been done before," Blackman tells us. "It was a good challenge to set for ourselves in regards to combat – an unabashed cover shooter. But trying to make it all work in an open, chaotic setting was hard. The complexity of open-world games is dramatically underestimated by everyone. The fact that everything touches everything else on some level is the greatest challenge, and we ran into that constantly. So we had to establish, early on, that the city would be fun to traverse. New Orleans is beautiful but it's hard to have a high-speed chase in a city with narrow streets and a lot of double-parked cars. We made dozens of grey-box test beds. We built one that was just hundreds of streets, so we could work out how fun it would be to drive down a street that was this narrow, or turned that way. That helped us set some of our metrics."

Hangar 13 itself also had to find ways of working harmoniously together. Hiring from across the game industry and developing alongside 2K Czech had introduced to the studio a lot of game-making ability, but different designers from different studios have different ways of working, and unifying all of their efforts proved a managerial challenge.

"We tried to organise around pieces of content and create cross-functional pods dedicated to making just that specific content," Blackman explains. "One pod would take on a particular mission, another would do one district of the city, and so on. But any time you're dealing with multiple world cultures and multiple development cultures, it's a challenge. We really stressed having those pods, which was a ▶

mind-shift for 2K Czech. And we'd hired people who were used to flying by the seat of their pants – we had to get them comfortable with the idea of production planning, and make it clear we weren't trying to limit creativity but enable it."

As well as an oriented and restructured dev team, cooperation on *Mafia III* was enabled by several editing tools, built in-house, alongside the game's engine. The pods continued to work individually, but were now capable of observing changes made by the other pods, as well as testing and predicting how their own input would alter *Mafia III* down the line. In particular, a tool that could determine how player decisions, at key stages in the narrative, would affect the game wholesale proved indispensable. It was now possible for each district of New Bordeaux – the stylised recreation of '60s New Orleans – to be constructed in tandem with every other. Hangar 13's ideal of a cohesive, narratively led open-world game was taking shape.

"Since we were building a whole new engine, we could quickly integrate it with the tools we were making," Worch explains. "Very clearly in the editor you could look at all the underlying data. Now we could model just how the story, between the three competing lieutenants – who could fall out with each other depending on how players divided the city – would work out. These were little things that no one playing the game would ever notice, but they were so important.

"It was almost like a water drop that started to fall, and then the waves crashed over the rest of the game. We started building the entire city, firstly just in terms of raw size and dimensions, just these big grey blocks. But at the same time there was this one district that was a little ahead of everything else. That area had art from the very beginning, and looked like New Bordeaux pretty much all the way through development. We could use it to test all our new mechanics and ideas."

The most complex part of *Mafia III*, however, was still waiting to be addressed. From the beginning of development, Blackman and Hangar 13 had endeavoured to make a different kind of open-world game. In the notoriously homogeneous world of videogames and videogame storytelling, a black lead character, whose revenge quest would see him violently dismantle a moneyed, white American culture, was somewhat atypical. But as work on *Mafia III* continued into 2016, and real-world political movements such as Black Lives Matter brought race and prejudice into the headlines on an almost daily basis, Blackman, Worch and the rest of the game's designers had to scrutinise their work closely. If *Mafia III* was overly focused on racial politics, it would seem like a cynical exploitation of current events. If the realities of its time and place were glossed over, that would be an even bigger affront.

Blackman: "We did huge amounts of research – thousands of hours of reading and watching and going on trips. And we did a lot of user testing. People from different backgrounds played the game and told us when we went too far or when we didn't go far enough. Things like Black Lives Matter happened while we were in development, and while we were focused on making a great game and not getting up on a soapbox, I told everyone that if we could make people think about those things then we would have done something that nobody else has."

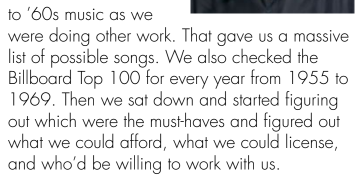
"Someone who was working with us, their grandparents were black," Worch explains. "But his grandmother was fair-skinned and his grandfather was dark-skinned, and they got constantly harassed because people thought they were a mixed-race couple. We could have put this stuff into cutscenes, but putting it into the world – in one of our early demos, you see this couple getting harassed in the street – made it come to life. It was important to me that we actually model how racism feels in gameplay. That's what makes games so powerful: you can feel what something is like. It's something everyone rallied around, people on the team from all different disciplines."

When it finally released, in October, 2016, *Mafia III* divided reviewers. At the same time as praising its story, and Hangar 13's willingness to approach difficult subject matter, critics argued the game was too direct – with such singular focus given to Lincoln Clay's quest for revenge, *Mafia III*'s open world, to some, felt far too closed. But Blackman and Worch maintain it was intentional. For many years, a familiar standard for sandbox games has predominated, and Hangar 13 always intended to try something different, even if it meant taking risks that would not pay off.

"I'm not trying to be dismissive, but it's easier to make a world that's full of individual things to do," Worch says. "You can set teams off to make things and then just put them together. On *Mafia III*, though, every element had to work with every other one. Each team had to react with each other, and understand what each other was doing. I'm not just proud of this game, I'm glad we made it."

"There's an open-world model where a bunch of stuff is thrown at you, and some of it is totally extraneous," Blackman concludes. "We wanted to focus on the things Lincoln would do. He's out for revenge. He's not going to waste time going fishing. Some critics rewarded us for that, some didn't. I could drive myself insane trying to second-guess every review and figure out what the writers wanted. But it's been called a 'cultural landmark'. How often in your career do you get to work on something like that? So that's what I keep telling the team: hold up your head." ■





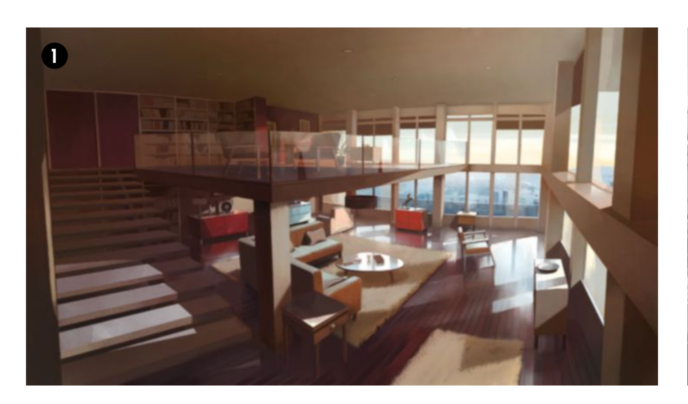
Q&A

Haden Blackman
Creative director

How did you decide on the soundtrack?
For months we listened to '60s music as we were doing other work. That gave us a massive list of possible songs. We also checked the Billboard Top 100 for every year from 1955 to 1969. Then we sat down and started figuring out which were the must-haves and figured out what we could afford, what we could license, and who'd be willing to work with us.

Sound design seems like it was a major focus – how did you source the voice actors?
We put together reference photos for who we would cast if we could have anyone in the world, and sent those out to agencies, which came back with a list of possible candidates. The scenes we wrote for auditions, however, weren't always designed for the game. They were written to push lots of different emotions, so we could see the actor's range. As for who we cast, first and foremost, they had to be good actors, but they also had to look the part. 2K's motion-capture studio is hands-down the best in its class, so we wanted to do full facial and body scans. However, we were able to work a little around the actors. Alex Hernandez, for example, who plays Lincoln, has a great voice, is a great actor and sounds the part, and when we saw his face we knew we would use him for Lincoln. But he's not as tall or broad as Lincoln, so we got another actor, an MMA fighter, to do the physical body work.

How did that process affect the game's story?
We modified the dialogue on set with the actors – all the exchanges between Donovan and Lincoln were written on the fly, once the two actors had a rapport. It wasn't until the game shipped that we finished all the writing.

















❶ Balancing *Mafia III*'s economy, so players could quickly smash up a gangster racket then move on to the next, presented a huge challenge for creative director Haden Blackman. ❷ To create its city, Hangar 13 organised countless research trips to New Orleans. ❸ Despite *Mafia III*'s many rivers and bayous, design director Matthias Worch admits it was difficult creating a sense of New Orleans' famed humidity. ❹ To determine what would make *Mafia III* a fun game to traverse, a grey-box level was built to test different lengths and breadths of roads. ❺ Many of New Orleans' neighbourhoods and historical buildings remain untouched since the '60s. ❻ New Bordeaux, *Mafia III*'s recreation of New Orleans, was created district by district, but one key area, used as a test bed, was built faster than the others



Ellika Henrikson

STUDIO PROFILE

IMAGE & FORM

An unlikely journey from edutainment outlet to Steam-powered success

By Chris Schilling



Founded 1997
Employees 19
Key staff Brjann Sigurgeirsson (co-founder, CEO), Olle Håkansson (creative lead, lead programmer)
URL imageform.se
Selected softography *SteamWorld Tower Defence, Anthill, SteamWorld Dig, SteamWorld Heist*
Current project TBA

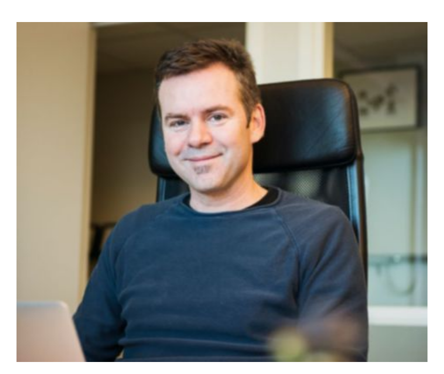
Sweden's Image & Form makes games with a watchmaker's precision, so it's perhaps no surprise that CEO **Brjann Sigurgeirsson** can pinpoint the most crucial date in the studio's history: October 2, 2009. It was on that day that Sigurgeirsson made a decision after receiving an email from his publisher, telling him that the studio's services were no longer required. Having delivered nearly 50 edutainment titles in eight years, with a team of eight people, Sigurgeirsson had a choice to make: sell up, or stay in the game.

He laughs at the memory. "I remember thinking, 'Am I going to fire everyone and just live off the bank account for years to come, or is this the point where we actually try to do something ourselves?' It was a mixture of things [that convinced me], really. First of all, I felt bad for this guy who had just started working for me the day before – I didn't have the heart to tell him that I'd made him quit his previous job only to fire him on the second day." The new recruit was Olle Håkansson, Image & Form's current creative lead and lead programmer; the studio may be Sigurgeirsson's baby, but he acknowledges Håkansson's importance to its newfound success more than once.

It wasn't just compassion behind his decision, Sigurgeirsson admits. The thought of returning to a one-man operation was equally unappealing. "I'd have had to go back to being some sort of computer consultant, and it just felt completely lame," he tells us. "Instead I told everyone that the edutainment-game contract was cancelled and now we had to start making our own games. It was very liberating, because there was a lot of pent-up creativity at work. We had been doing these edutainment games, and towards the end it felt like creative suicide."

By then, Image & Form had already been in operation for over a decade as a multimedia company. Sigurgeirsson founded the studio in 1997, when the web was in its infancy, having spent six years in Tokyo and two in San Francisco doing multimedia work. "I had a history of making multimedia presentations using Macromedia Director, and they were distributed by CD-ROM," he recalls. "We made two multimedia projects and then transformed into a web studio making websites and such."

Sigurgeirsson began tinkering with game development during his free time, but he felt the barriers to earning a reasonable living making games were just too great to be able to do it full-time. It wasn't until 2001 that edutainment became the company's main source of income. A Scandinavian publisher got in touch with Sigurgeirsson and begged him to help rescue one of its projects. "It was a kids' edutainment title, it was almost done, and the developer they'd been working with had gone bankrupt," Sigurgeirsson says. "There was very little left to do on the game, so I just programmed the last bit of it. It was so gratifying to be working with games and getting paid for it, so I pestered them in the years to come to let us make more and more games for them – and so we did."


Brjann Sigurgeirsson, co-founder and CEO of Image & Form

"WE'D BEEN DOING THESE EDUTAINMENT GAMES, AND TOWARDS THE END IT FELT LIKE CREATIVE SUICIDE"

Image & Form had seemingly found its niche, but while it was a solid little earner for Sigurgeirsson and company, by the time the axe fell in 2009, the studio was, in his words, "swimming in backwaters": its games were still being built in Adobe Director and distributed on CD-ROM. Sigurgeirsson acknowledges that it may even have been Image & Form's high yield that hastened its exit from the edutainment market, but this eight-year spell had been lucrative enough that it had enough cash in the bank to fund its venture into game development proper. Even so, some downsizing was required in the short term. With too many artists and not enough programmers, the developer had become lopsided. Eight became four, Håkansson was promoted to lead programmer ("Probably the best thing that ever happened to Image & Form," Sigurgeirsson concedes), and the studio began to forge a new path that would eventually bring it much wider attention.

Not that it was all plain sailing. The rise of the App Store convinced Sigurgeirsson that the mobile market was where his company's future lay, but its early experiments weren't cutting the mustard. By early 2010, with the number of iOS games increasing exponentially, he had begun to doubt whether Image & Form could find an audience there. Another option soon presented itself: Nintendo's recently opened DSiWare store. Its digital shelves were relatively bare, so the studio began making a game in a familiar genre that wasn't particularly prevalent on the platform. "There weren't any tower-defence games [on DSi] at that point," Sigurgeirsson says. "We then spent three or four months making *SteamWorld Tower Defence*, and by the time we were done with it there were three other excellent tower-defence games!" While the likes of *Fieldrunners* and Q-Games' excellent *Starship Patrol* gained more critical attention, *SteamWorld Tower Defence* earned a handful of positive reviews – enough for the game to break even – and a small audience of fans. Its stern difficulty became a talking point: Håkansson is still the only member of Image & Form to have finished the game.

Buoyed by the response, Sigurgeirsson decided to give the App Store another shot, with another game in the same genre. *Anthill* was similarly warmly received and managed to turn a profit, but still the CEO had his doubts about the future of paid games on iOS. "Maybe it looks like a strange decision to leave mobile after having a successful game, but in 2012 we were so worried because it was getting incredibly crowded. We didn't really understand this new entity called free-to-play, and I didn't feel ▶



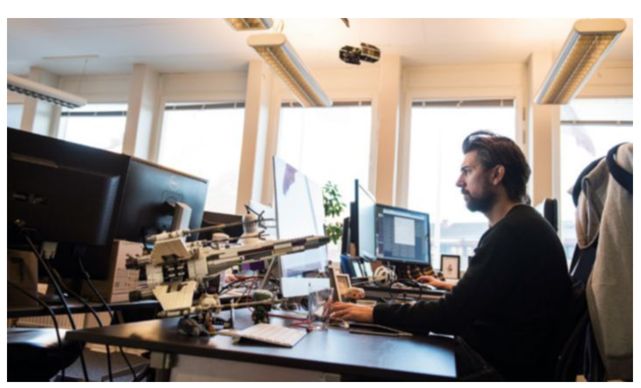


Image & Form has spent five years at its current home, but it's been through seven offices since its formation. "We're comfortable here, which is as good a reason as any not to expand further," Sigurgeirsson says. Peter Broqvist (above) is a technical artist and I&F's lead writer

confident that we were going to succeed there. It just felt like a lottery: if you get featured [by Apple] it goes well; if you don't, it doesn't matter how good your game is, it's just going to fly under everyone's radar."

Though DSiWare had hardly been a huge success, Sigurgeirsson noted that Nintendo seemed more committed towards its digital store for its next portable platform. "We figured we'd made [*SteamWorld Tower Defence*] for the DSiWare store, so maybe we could at least sell to those guys who bought that game," he says. "And this time we'd actually go and talk to Nintendo about the 3DS and how we'd go about getting some sort of feature on the eShop."

Having established a set of ground rules for the SteamWorld universe, Image & Form opted to return to it with *SteamWorld Dig*, a platform adventure with influences ranging from *Metroid* to *Spelunky* and *Mr Driller*. The game took nine months to build, with development concluding in June 2013, after which Sigurgeirsson gave his staff a month off ahead of a planned August release. But with everyone's nose to the grindstone, the studio had invested very little time in promoting the game. Image & Form now had a dozen staff, and the money left over from the edutainment games was dwindling rapidly. Happily, a slot in Nintendo of Europe's August Direct advertising *Dig*'s availability at the end of the presentation attracted plenty of early adopters. Critical praise and positive word of mouth followed, serving as payoff for the effort invested in the game's creation.

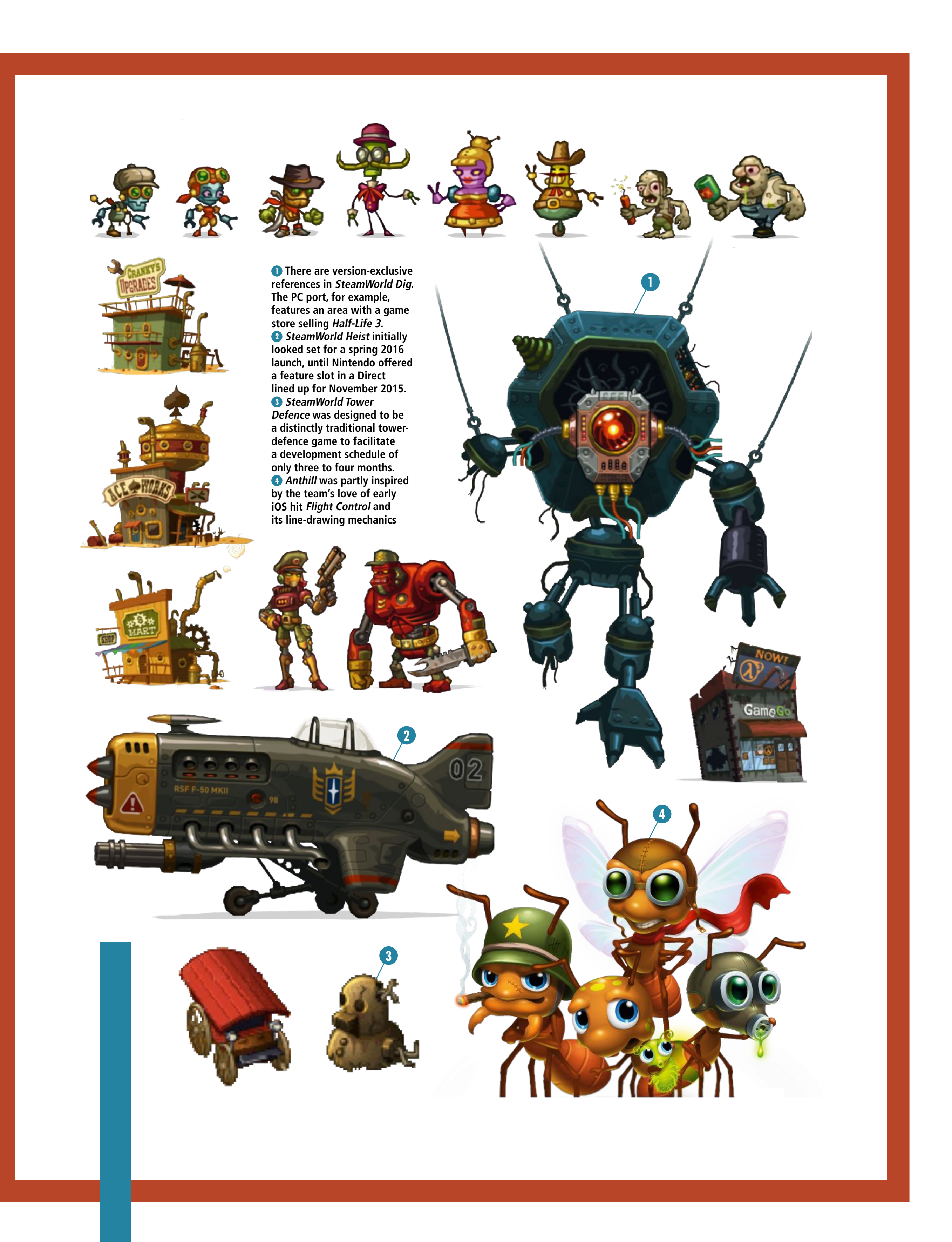
The studio took another gamble with its next release. Towards the end of *SteamWorld Dig*'s development, with funds getting short, Sigurgeirsson began to fret that making games like this was simply too risky. "We'd spent so much money that I thought we should start aiming at making smaller games – games that we could complete in a maximum of four or five months." But the reviews from critics and players convinced him that bigger and better was the way to go. "So many of them ended in [variations on] 'I can't wait to see what these guys are up to next' that I felt this was our one chance to really make a name for ourselves," he says. "Immediately afterwards we'd started working on two smaller games in parallel. But if we followed *SteamWorld Dig* with those, I think it would have made us into a one-hit wonder."

With SteamWorld now established as a signature brand, Image & Form recognised that *Dig*'s success had proved there was nothing stopping it from making a radically different game within the same universe. *SteamWorld Heist*, a 2D turn-based strategy game with realtime combat, was the eventual result. Keen not to make the same mistake by ignoring the importance of promotion, Sigurgeirsson announced the game in August 2014, boldly suggesting a release in spring 2015. But by Christmas, it had become clear that while Image & Form could've launched the game at that point, it wouldn't be anywhere close to the studio's exacting standards. "We'd spent nine months making *Dig*, and the next game was going to be bigger and better, so I figured we'd spend ten months making *Heist*," Sigurgeirsson laughs. "Then it ended up taking 22 months!"

Sigurgeirsson admits he's only heard the oft-quoted Miyamoto maxim about delayed games fairly recently, but it certainly applies to *Heist*'s lengthy development – the result of a complete rethink after a year. Not that you'd see any evidence in the finished game, which bears the signature of a studio to which polish is vital. "There's this triangle, right? Where [the points] are quality, money and time, and people say you can only ever get two out of three. Well, at Image & Form it feels like we can never get more than one!" He laughs again. "We take time when we know the game would really benefit from it. Being the guy who runs the company and has to make sure that everyone gets paid every month, it can be nightmarish at times. But every time we've made a game, we can look back and say that we never compromised on anything. We're really proud of that."

"PEOPLE SAY, YOU CAN ONLY EVER GET TWO OUT OF THREE. WELL, IT FEELS LIKE WE CAN NEVER GET MORE THAN ONE!"

Though *Heist* and *Dig* have since been ported to a range of formats – enjoying no little success on PC and PlayStation – Sigurgeirsson admits, "We view ourselves as a 'Nindie' and Nintendo treats us as such. Whenever they do something with indie games they're always asking us if we want to participate. So that's very nice." And while Sigurgeirsson isn't ready to talk about the studio's current project, we suspect the relationship is likely to bear further fruit. "To say that we never compromise is not 100 per cent true, but that's the way that we like to perceive ourselves. We deliver high-quality, very polished games." Little wonder this small team from Gothenburg has received such a warm endorsement from Kyoto's finest. ■



1 There are version-exclusive references in *SteamWorld Dig*. The PC port, for example, features an area with a game store selling *Half-Life 3*.
2 *SteamWorld Heist* initially looked set for a spring 2016 launch, until Nintendo offered a feature slot in a Direct lined up for November 2015.
3 *SteamWorld Tower Defence* was designed to be a distinctly traditional tower-defence game to facilitate a development schedule of only three to four months.
4 *Anthill* was partly inspired by the team's love of early iOS hit *Flight Control* and its line-drawing mechanics

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Super Mario 3D World Wii U
With the younger end of the **Edge** brood becoming increasingly curious about games of late, we've headed back to Mario's most recent outing, now known round these parts as *Walking Mario Kart*. It's perhaps a little narrower in scope than we remember, but it's only raised anticipation for the Switch-exclusive *Super Mario Odyssey*. Given the youngsters' habit of immediately walking off the nearest ledge, it might be handy if it does away with the lives system, too.

Dishonored 2 PS4
The short wait for *Dishonored 2*'s New Game Plus mode was worth enduring. Rather than plugging in a traditional NG+ option, Arkane has gone further and allowed returning players to select either Emily or Corvo, but pick and choose from both protagonists' selection of powers. The resulting assailants are even more formidable than before, which is where a newly introduced suite of custom difficulty sliders, and the ability to replay individual missions, will come in handy.

Wind Waker HD Wii U
With *Breath Of The Wild*'s release date drawing near, we fancied reliving an earlier adventure with Link. But given that we should get our fill of hillocks and woods from the next *Zelda* game, we elected to skip back past *Twilight Princess* and set sail in *Wind Waker*. With a little help from HD polish, *Zelda*'s most divisive aesthetic still feels brand new and has lost none of its charm. But much more importantly, the introduction of the Swift Sail makes all that sailing less of a slog.

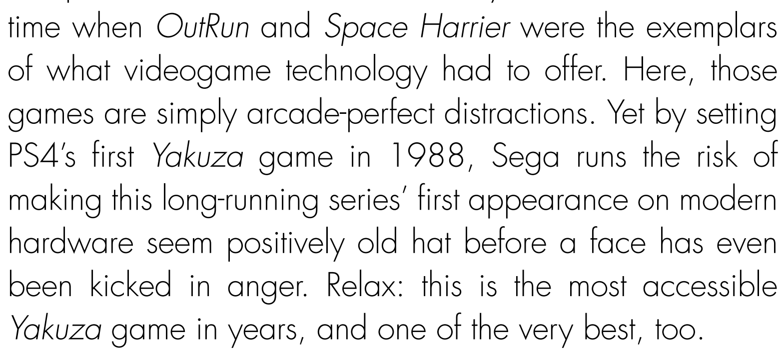
REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

One step back, two steps forward

The past is a dangerous thing in videogames. When Capcom says that one of its overarching goals with *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard* (p94) is to return to the sphincter-tightening brand of survival horror that defined the series in the first place, your thoughts might naturally turn to tank controls, to crude polygonal dogs bursting through windows, and to Jill Valentine, the master of unlocking. Of course, Capcom means that it's returning to the spirit of the first game – and it has done so in style and splendour. But the negative connotation is unavoidable in a medium where we expect sequels to be in lock step with the onward march of technology, and for their timescales to do the same. Any whiff of the past merely invites suspicion.



So it is with *Yakuza 0* (p98), which rewinds the clock by three decades to the time when *OutRun* and *Space Harrier* were the exemplars of what videogame technology had to offer. Here, those games are simply arcade-perfect distractions. Yet by setting PS4's first *Yakuza* game in 1988, Sega runs the risk of making this long-running series' first appearance on modern hardware seem positively old hat before a face has even been kicked in anger. Relax: this is the most accessible *Yakuza* game in years, and one of the very best, too.



Indeed, if this month tells us anything, it's that more games could make use of the rewind button. *Gravity Rush 2* (p102) begins immediately after the events of the first game; its opening is ponderously dull, its action takes far too long to show its true colours and, by sticking so close to its predecessor in terms of time, it's unable to shake free of its less successful elements. It's a game that mucks about with gravity, but on this month's evidence it might have been better off had it also played around with time.

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PSVR, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Like one of the unfortunates infected by the T-virus, Capcom's long-running series has undergone a profound mutation for its latest iteration. The contaminate in *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard*'s system isn't a lab-engineered mutagen, but rather the surprising influence of Konami's *Silent Hill* series, and a not inconsiderable dose of some of the ideas Red Barrels introduced in its debut horror effort *Outlast* (a game that's itself heavily indebted to Capcom's early work).

In fact, *Biohazard* immediately invites direct comparison with *Outlast* by starting in a familiar manner. The game opens as protagonist Ethan Winters comes to the end of a long drive through desolate countryside and pulls up just outside the grounds of a dilapidated old building. After handling Winters' disembarkation with a short animation, Capcom dutifully hands over firstperson control to the player and tasks them with finding a way into the building. Winters' motivation to put himself in obvious danger runs a little deeper than journalistic curiosity, however, as he's here after receiving a message from his late wife.

While there are plenty of jump scares and outlandish monsters along the way, *Biohazard* breaks with series tradition to keep the player in a near-continual state of psychological unease that makes this entry one of the most exhausting, and brilliant, survival-horror games in years. Sure, the series has dabbled with other genres in the past – most recently in the rotten *Umbrella Corps* – but in every case the end result has been like a brittle, crooked branch sprouting from an otherwise robust trunk. *Biohazard* is a numbered sequel, of course, but it represents an innovative, benchmark-setting template that breathes new life into a series that hasn't felt truly progressive since its fourth instalment – a high point that's now more than a decade old.

Such a far-reaching overhaul was always going to perturb traditionalists, of course. Many voiced their disappointment in forum posts and on social media after the game's reveal in June last year, accusing Capcom's designers of straying too far from the company's original vision, disgruntled purists self-defeatingly labelling the game a 'triple-A *Outlast*'. But while there are absolutely comparisons to be drawn, such reductive classification fails to take into account the generous list of Capcom's own ideas that set *Biohazard* apart from other firstperson horror games.

Unfortunately, not all of them are good ones. As much a product of the game's VR leanings as its series' legacy, default walking speed is somewhat sluggish and lacks any sense of dynamism. Things can be improved by spending a little time with the game's extensive selection of sliders, and the ability to quick-turn helps, but even with everything dialled up as far as it will go, the sense persists that you're wrestling with the vestigial remains of tank-control DNA.

Biohazard breaks with series tradition to keep the player in a near-continual state of psychological unease



The setup does its job insofar as it gleefully introduces moments of sticky panic while you desperately try to get through a door and close it before whatever is behind you gets any closer, but it needs space to function at its best. When you're hemmed into smaller areas with fast-moving enemies, or those with ranged attacks, it can frustrate. Two claustrophobic boss fights early on – one which takes place in a garage, and another in a macabre storage cage – suffer as a result, and end up being more irritating than tense. Some ill-considered checkpoint placement that fails to take into account drawn-out, unskippable cutscenes (excellent the first time, but quickly frustrating thereafter) and initially poorly telegraphed rules of engagement conspire with Winters' lumpen reaction speeds to tarnish what is otherwise a memorable opening hour.

Tackle the same encounters in VR, however, and it's clear that they've been balanced for players who have the ability to look over their shoulders while keeping on the move. Both are significantly improved with the PSVR headset, but it's a pity that a middle ground couldn't be found in these instances. And it's all the more frustrating when Capcom hits its stride shortly thereafter and delivers a number of exceptional boss encounters that excel in either mode.

But it's in between these fights that Capcom really flexes its survival-horror muscles. The game takes place across locations that are parts of a gradually expanding, tightly packed map, which unfurls as you unlock smart – and often surprising – shortcuts. This, together with some puzzles whose constituent parts are spread out across considerable distances, makes backtracking a pleasure. You'll rarely have the run of the place, however, as there's usually something – or someone – in each area with you. In many cases you simply need to avoid being spotted by a creature that doesn't know you're there, and can't open doors anyway. But on other occasions you'll find yourself stalked by the house's violent occupants, or hunted down by shambling but relentless creatures in darkened corridors.

At least the Molded, the catch-all term given to a host of grim mutants that look like they're made of tar, can be downed with a close-proximity shotgun blast to the head – or, at least, a proportion of lucky hits from the dozens of poorly aimed pistol shots you loosed in panic. However, many of the humans you'll encounter are capable of regenerating themselves (for plot reasons we won't spoil here) and impossible to kill outright. You can down them temporarily, but it's only a matter of time before they get back up again – a little more angry than before – while you desperately search for the items you need in order to proceed and try to figure out how they must be used. ▶



ABOVE The Bakers' mute matriach figure appears at various points throughout the game, her silence and stillness somehow more unnerving than the monsters.
LEFT The Molded are one aspect of *Biohazard* that feels more in the tradition of classic *Resident Evil* games. They can be downed with one shotgun blast to the head, but you'll have to let them get uncomfortably close to you first

BELOW Hiding from Jack or Maguerite Baker is a stressful activity, especially given that they continually taunt you as they search. If you're discovered, you can guard against attacks to reduce damage, run away, or stagger them if you have a weapon to hand



ABOVE Not everything in the game wants to kill you, and you'll spend some sections in the company of other characters. The game is no less scary for it, however, as Capcom uses their presence to raise tension

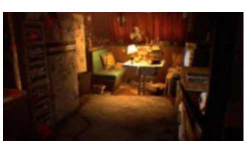


While the Baker property is made up of several discrete buildings, they're all linked by a web of secret passageways and rickety walkways. The coherence of the environment evokes memories of early *Resi* games

Some of *Biohazard*'s most memorable puzzles span time as well as physical distance. You'll acquire several video cassettes during the game which, when played in any of the VCRs dotted about the world, put you in control of other characters at some point in the past. Brilliantly, these sequences are used to foreshadow areas that you're about to visit, presenting them in a different context and providing clues as to how they can be reached in your own timeline. Rather than make tackling them a second time around easier, however, Capcom instead takes the opportunity to lean on your nerves a little harder than might be considered sporting had you not already mapped out the territory, and toys with your expectations.

It's also one of many tools the studio uses to tell its surprisingly well-written – and performed – story. By *Resident Evil* standards at least, *Biohazard*'s narrative is a pleasantly restrained yarn that is often as rich as it is terrifying. Capcom hasn't blithely abandoned the abstractions and camp excesses of *Resident Evil*'s universe – you still consume herbs to fix any ailment, even chainsaw wounds; chests in save rooms happily ignore the laws of physics and offer up their contents in every location; and the game's mawkish ending feels anachronistic in its new context – but the studio has embraced a more convincing tone that exacerbates the terror, and frames each set-piece and period of exploration with a greater severity than the game's predecessors ever set out to.

One sequence in particular, involving a child's bedroom, will stay with us for a long time. But a particularly creepy boss fight prior to it – tackled during the day, in a well-lit, busy office – elicited involuntary exclamations from two **Edge** staffers that neither is proud of.



UNKIND REWIND

While checkpoint saving still takes place, *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard* has dropped the frustrating autosave system of the past two main instalments and returns to the save locations of earlier games. Instead of a typewriter, however, here you use a cassette deck. As with *Resident Evil 4*, you can save as often as you want, and sometimes it's sensible to trek back from the brink of a new area in order to juggle your inventory, mop up items from preceding areas, and make sure you're ready to tackle whatever the game throws at you next. Once you've finished the game, Madhouse difficulty unlocks. In this mode, enemies are considerably tougher and more aggressive, checkpoints are reduced, and you can only save by using a cassette – placing further strain on your inventory.

Biohazard's downbeat, atmospheric squalor and gloom is rendered all the more potent by Capcom's new RE Engine. The Molded glisten like Giger-esque nightmares as they loom out of the darkness. Steam billows and swirls in believable patterns across the floor of damp corridors. Capcom lavishes particularly extravagant detail on decaying food and flesh. The game's human character models are also striking, the combination of their eerily convincing presence and exceptional lighting effects making the prospect of being caught all the more unbearable.

While the visuals take an expected hit in VR mode, particularly detailed areas – not least the dense foliage in outdoor sections – really suffer at PSVR's resolution. There are some odd quirks, too, such as the way that items you pick up to examine feel slightly too far away, and that a portion of your drive at the beginning of the game plays out on a virtual screen before dumping you into the interior of a 3D car at the last moment so that you can get out of it. For the most part, however, *Biohazard* makes excellent use of VR to make an already alarming game all the more hideous (see Post Script).

With *Biohazard* Capcom might've taken liberties with a much-cherished format, but it does so with such bravado that it's hard to imagine the seventh instalment coming together in any other way. And while it's unlikely to win as many hearts as *Resident Evil 4* did, it's an equally important and remarkable entry in the series' tumultuous timeline.

9

Post Script

What Biohazard teaches us about VR's relationship to traditional game design

PSVR has so far proven to be a highly capable VR setup, but while we've enjoyed much of what it has to offer – even if most of our time is now spent replaying *Rez Infinite*'s Area X – we've been hankering for something a bit more substantial to get stuck into. And with *Resident Evil VII*, Capcom has provided PSVR's first truly sizeable offering. As such, it's something of a test case for VR's suitability when it comes to providing traditional console experiences (and, hopefully, a way to increase our threshold for time spent in VR before needing to consume an entire bowl of fruit and have a lie down outdoors).

Capcom has been broadly successful in building a game that caters for both VR and 2D displays, but *Biohazard* also highlights the difficulty of balancing such a complex, relatively long game so that it offers the best possible experience across two formats that, inevitably, have quite different characteristics.

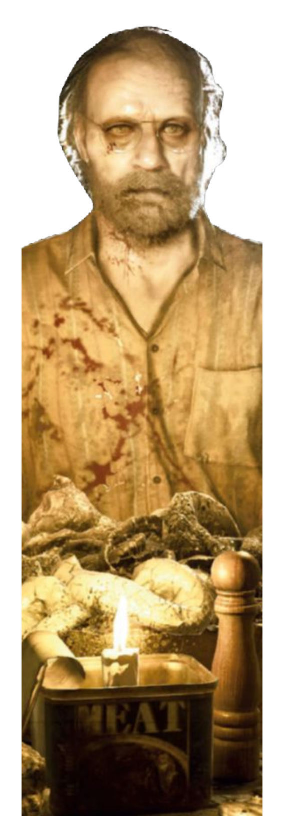
Early on in the game you'll fight Jack Baker – head of the disturbing family that has taken you prisoner – in the garage. The encounter starts simply enough. Jack chases you around a parked car while you try to land some headshots in order to stagger him and maintain a little breathing space between the pair of you. Various items sit around the perimeter of the room, and among the ammo and health are keys for the aforementioned car. If you're quick enough, you can hop in and use the vehicle to end the fight quickly, ramming Jack against the wall. But if he's too close when you get in, you'll be torn from your seat and tossed aside as he commandeers it for himself. If that happens, you'll find yourself in the maddening position of trying to avoid a car pulling doughnuts in a small garage while in control of a character who runs at walking pace.

Another fight with Jack a little later on sees him chasing you around a claustrophobic arena containing a pillar and a few dangling bodies, which can be used to slow him down. While he begins the fight with an axe, he'll switch to a twin-bladed chainsaw at some point and begin charging at you with alarming speed. In both cases it's difficult – though not impossible – to avoid being hit if playing on a 2D display because you can't easily keep tabs on his position to judge where in the room to move. Using the headset allows you to stay focused on Jack while keeping half an eye on where you're heading. You gain a better appreciation of the space you're in, and of the distance between you and your tormentor. That the balance of these battles swings in favour of VR over a more traditional setup, especially given that most players are likely to experience it the latter way, is somewhat surprising.

Other aspects of the game are clearly geared towards VR as well. It's there in some of the scripted sequences and jump scares, which stand out in the same way that scenes specifically made for 3D cinema do in films. You'll also spend a fair amount of time hiding from characters who are actively looking for you, ducking behind furniture or tucking yourself away on a rickety balcony in order to avoid being detected. While it's usually possible to dash out of sight and find a new hiding place when you're spotted, remaining unnoticed is made a little easier when you're able to keep tabs on your pursuer by leaning around the pool table you're crouched behind, or peeking through a window. And beyond the mechanical functionality of being able to look and see what's going on, doing so also ensures that when you have to remain still for a period of time it feels more engaging. Some items and consumables have also been placed with players who can crane their necks in mind.

But while examples such as this make for a richer experience in VR, there are aspects of the game that suffer instead. The fizzing aliasing issues that occur when there's a lot of geometry onscreen go to show that not all environments can be easily transferred between displays. And tiny details, such as whether a camera pans or flicks when you crouch, or whether your hands float or are attached to a character model, can ironically make the standard mode feel *more* immersive than its VR counterpart in certain respects.

Irrespective of Biohazard's inconsistencies, Capcom should be applauded for offering the entirety of its game in VR



And while some boss fights and item hunting benefit from the added sense of environmental awareness that VR brings, one obvious compromise of building a game for two formats is that there are no VR-specific puzzles or interactions throughout. This isn't a criticism – *Biohazard*'s cloying atmosphere and tense chases benefit more meaningfully than many other titles from the simple addition of presence that VR delivers – but it does underscore the very different requirements of VR and traditional games.

Irrespective of *Biohazard*'s inconsistencies, Capcom should be applauded for offering the entirety of its game in VR. While hardly bespoke, *Biohazard*'s VR mode works exceptionally well for the most part – so well, in fact, that we had to tear the headset off on a number of occasions in order to calm down – and is a generous addition to an already sizeable package for those brave enough to commit to it. However, despite this, it's difficult to shake the feeling that the game would have turned out slightly differently if Capcom had chosen to focus on one display mode or the other. *Biohazard* serves as convincing proof that VR can sustain large-scale games, but it also reminds us that it's a tall order to deliver a game that works equally well whether it's viewed on a 2D display or from within a headset. ■

Yakuza 0

Honestly, Kazuma Kiryu has never seemed the sort. Strong willed, kind hearted and deferential, this is a man who treats others as he would like to be treated himself – but, as we discover in a seedy downtown building, sometimes he *really* likes to treat himself. Here, in a series first, you can watch what the in-game text describes as 'erotic videos'. As a CRT screen fades to black after a minute-long, live-action video of a bikini-clad model simpering on a bed while surrounded by balloon animals, we hear a relieved sigh from Kiryu, and the camera pans away from the TV, lingering on the box of tissues next to it. The *Yakuza* series has long had woman trouble, with its damsels and sex objects, but never has it been so overtly mucky.

There are similarly embarrassing thrills to be had elsewhere. At TelTel Boys Club, you make flirtatious dialogue choices to gradually bring into focus a blurry CG girl writhing lasciviously in her underwear, culminating in you asking her out on a date. At the underground club Vincent, you can bet on fights between girls whose proportions and state of undress would make even Team Ninja blush. Over in Osaka, secondary protagonist Goro Majima can recruit girls off the street, dressing and making them over as he sees fit before putting them to work in his cabaret club.

If we're being kind, perhaps there's a narrative justification for all this. *Yakuza 0* is, as its name implies, a prequel; Kiryu is barely 20, Majima just four years his senior. No doubt the fires in their loins burned a little brighter back in the late '80s, and thwacking a near-endless stream of bad guys wasn't quite enough to work through all that surplus testosterone. Either way, *Yakuza 0*'s seamier elements are, at least, avoidable, and there are plenty of other distractions off the critical path.

That's putting it mildly, in fact. A subtle tweak to series conventions sees side-stories and activities brought into the foreground somewhat; you'll turn a corner on your way to your next objective and be stopped by a pedestrian in need of help, rather than needing to seek them out. When, as Kiryu, we're told by a group of homeless men that they'll only give us the information we need if we buy them a specific round of drinks – each hobo wanting something different, requiring trips to several shops – our journey sees us strike up a surprise friendship with a convenience-store clerk, help a boy who's just been mugged for his copy of a hot new videogame, fill in as a producer on a TV shoot in a restaurant, then stop off for an arcade-perfect game of *OutRun* on the way back. As Majima, we're told we have two days to carry out a hit or we'll become the target. Minutes later we're infiltrating a cult to rescue the daughter of a nice lady we just met in the park.

You can always say no, but you never will – and this time it's not just because you're roleplaying, as Kiryu, one of the nicest men in videogames (and as Majima before he became the punchable basket case of other games in the series). Now, reaching certain progression milestones awards you Completion Points, which can be exchanged at a city shrine for buffs, moves, items and abilities. As ever, completing these likeably bonkers side-stories is reward enough in itself, but now there's a mechanical reward for helping out the troubled denizens of Kamurocho and Sotenbori.

Developer Yakuza Studio
Publisher Sega
Format PS3, PS4 (tested)
Release Out now

Such steps forward may seem at odds with the time period, but that late-'80s setting is put to brilliant use in the story



SOMEBODY'S BUSINESS
Money is vitally important in *Yakuza 0*, since it powers the skill system you'll use to upgrade your combat styles. Flashy, varied fighting increases the payouts from battles, but the less bloodthirsty can go into (mostly) legitimate business. Kiryu runs a real-estate operation; Majima takes over a cabaret club, entering partnerships with local businesses, recruiting girls and prettying them up to increase their yield. Fisticuffs will be required to shut down meddling rivals from time to time; to spice things up, another distraction lets you despatch agents to far-flung lands to gather materials for new custom weapons. Little wonder that, when we complete the story with 40 hours on the clock, our completion stat is less than 20 per cent.

There are tweaks elsewhere, too, but none is so transformative as the overhaul of the combat system. *Yakuza 0*'s dual-protagonist setup seems, on paper, like a step backwards, given the series' recent habit of stuffing the game with multiple playable characters, each with a different fighting style. The solution is to give Kiryu and Majima three styles each, switchable in realtime using the D-pad. Kiryu has his classic Brawler style, but can also use Rush, which sees his attack speed build with successive hits, and grants him a succession of flighty dashes, or Beast, in which he picks up nearby weapons and can absorb most of the damage from incoming blows. Majima has his default Thug style, but Slugger gives him access to a baseball bat, while Breaker lets him deploy strings of blows using moves taught to him by a local breakdancing crew. It's an unprecedented level of flexibility for the series, and means combat is often as much about finding the right tool for the job as it is about mashing buttons. Key combat encounters have been designed around it – bosses in multiple phases, for instance, prompting a switch in style – building to a climax where Kiryu must fight three foes at once, each using one of his own movesets against him.

Such steps forward may seem at odds with the time period, but that late-'80s setting is put to brilliant use in the story. Within minutes, young Kiryu is framed for a murder and quits the yakuza to clear his name; when we meet Majima, who is running a cabaret to repay his bosses for a scandal that saw him expelled from the clan, he's quickly told to carry out a hit. At the centre of it all is a girl and a tiny scrap of land, both being sought urgently by conflicting factions in a good old-fashioned gangland power struggle. But every face you meet is new, a blank slate even if you recognise them from other games. This is a reboot in the truest sense.

Casting off five games' worth of backstory – recent *Yakuza* games have begun with the option to recap the story so far in lengthy, newcomer-baffling cinematics – means this is a tale free of the bloat and baggage that has made each new instalment in this wonderful but complex series hard to recommend to anyone but established fans. Well, no longer. With *Yakuza Kiwami*, a hitherto Japan-only remake of Kiryu's first PS2 outing, finally coming to the west this summer, there's never been a better time to jump into a series that's quite unlike anything else around.

8





ABOVE Tojo Clan lieutenant Daisaku Kuze is a recurring antagonist – you'll fight him several times over the course of the game. He never quite seems to learn his lesson, but in true *Yakuza* style, he finds redemption eventually



TOP Majima's Breaker style is a thrillingly ludicrous way to fight. Rapid taps of the Triangle button can devastate groups of enemies in a tornado of whirling limbs. MAIN Given the greater variety of fighting styles, we found ourselves less drawn to melee weapons than in previous games in the series. They're still devastating when deployed at the right moment. RIGHT Climax Battles are short, scored challenges that sit apart from the story mode and invite friendly competition through online leaderboards. Here, Majima must amass a certain amount of money by battering a group of b-boys





It's often said that the city is the star of an open-world game, but the Kamurocho arch is as iconic to fans as Kiryu himself

Post Script

The benefits of putting down roots

Since Kazuma Kiryu's debut in 2005, Sega has released six mainline *Yakuza* games. Over the same time period, Ubisoft has shipped nine *Assassin's Creeds*. Both have had their spinoffs – Yakuza Studio has also made the zombie-infested *Dead Souls*, two PSP games and a pair of historical works, subtitled *Kenzan* and *Ishin*. But while Ubisoft's flagship series travels the globe, darting through time and from one protagonist to the next, the mainline *Yakuza* games have been about one man, Kazuma Kiryu, and Kamurocho, the bit of Tokyo's red-light district he calls home.

Yes, there have been frequent sojourns to Osaka's Sotenbori district, as in *Yakuza 0* and last year's *Yakuza 5*; Kiryu has run an orphanage in Okinawa, and been a cabbie in Fukuoka. Nor do we spend our entire time in a *Yakuza* game looking over Kiryu's muscled shoulders; here we have Majima running his cabaret club, last year there was Haruka with her pop-star ambitions, and other games have also let us play as a loan shark, a baseball player, a cop. But Kiryu and Kamurocho are the beating, bloody heart of the *Yakuza* series.

The benefits to this approach are obvious. As a character, we know Kiryu's personality: his strengths, his weaknesses, his likely reaction to any given situation. We know his history, where he sits in the complex Tojo clan hierarchy, and how each double- or triple-cross impacts upon him and those around him. And we know how to play as him: his movesets were committed to muscle memory years ago.

So, too, were his movements. When low on health, we know where the nearest restaurant is, understanding that we should never eat the same thing twice, since restaurant menus count toward the completion stat. Stocking up on supplies before a big fight, we don't need to open the map to find the nearest store, because we've been there hundreds of times before. Every street corner and town square has meaning; you'll visit a food cart near the rooftop where you once learned fighting moves from a military veteran, chat with hobos in a park that, in years to come, will hold a door to an underground casino. There's a pink objective marker on the screen-corner minimap, but we rarely actually need it.

So while *Yakuza 0*'s dart back in time means it's an ideal jumping-in point for newcomers, it provides a special thrill for long-time series fans. This is Kamurocho as you know it, but also not; an establishment might be the same, but look different – the modern-day games' Club Sega are here named Sega High-Tech Land, for instance, and 2000s-era neon is replaced by strings of incandescent lightbulbs. The Millennium Tower, the scene of the explosive climax to the first *Yakuza* game, is an empty lot in 1988.

You don't get any of that from *Assassin's Creed*. It's no coincidence that many consider *Brotherhood* to be the series' high-water mark; Ubisoft brought back Ezio Auditore da Firenze, letting players spend more time fleshing out the story of the series' rarest commodity – a likeable protagonist. Had Ubisoft followed the *Yakuza* model, fleshing out a single character – one whose adventures might have taken him elsewhere, but who would always call Florence home – the series would likely now be in a very different place. It wouldn't, you'd think, be taking a year off because the demands of building a brand-new world, hero and story every 12 months without fail no longer feels sustainable.

Part of the *Yakuza* games' appeal are the lessons it teaches. Every duffed-up urchin vows to change, troubled citizens see the errors of their ways, and as players we wish we could live as noble, as even-tempered, as honest a life as Kazuma Kiryu. Yet these games could also teach a thing or two to peers working on budgets that dwarf Yakuza Studio's many times over. That stability is an asset, that you can move forward while seeming to stand still; that, while flights of fancy may delight, there's truly no place like home. ■

Gravity Rush 2

Well, this is all thoroughly inconvenient – unless, like *Gravity Rush 2*'s Kat, you can bend the law of gravity to your will. This game's world is something of a playground for those who thumb their nose at Newtonian physics: it's spread across scores of floating islands placed high in the sky and sat hundreds of metres apart. But for everyone else? It's a life lived high up in the clouds on tiny patches of land, connected only by slow, rickety airbuses, and with a conspicuous absence of safety measures.

Still, this is Kat's world, and perhaps it wouldn't be fair to fault Keiichiro Toyama and his team for showing little consideration for reality in a game that goes out of the way to subvert one of the real world's defining principles. It's a necessary evil in a game that lets you go anywhere by simply lining it up in your crosshairs and pressing a button. If we're to unhook ourselves from mankind's innate fear of falling, we're going to have to unhook everything else from it, too.

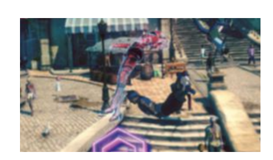
And so *Gravity Rush 2* is, by design, a bit of a mess. Kat, uncommonly for a videogame superhero, never seems entirely in control of her powers, cartwheeling and tumbling through the sky; missing platforms by a whisker; landing into a stagger. Still, she's a capable sort, at least by game's end – she starts with nothing at all in a drab opening that picks up immediately after the end of the original *Gravity Rush*. Eventually her abilities are expanded when two new powers appear around halfway through the story, and it's only here that *Gravity Rush 2* begins to show its true self.

Those discoveries are subtle, though somewhat predictable, variations on Kat's core moveset, allowing her to switch between her three loadouts with swipes on the DualShock 4 touchpad. Lunar style gives her a chargeable, much higher jump, the flatter, faster rocket jump, and lets her start her aerial kick move – essential against flying enemies – with a teleport. Jupiter style offers the opposite, making her heavier and slower, able to smash through debris and walls, and obliterate large groups of enemies with a shockwave slam. While the missions that introduce these new movesets are designed around a specific set of powers, thereafter it's sometimes a matter of finding the right tool for the job, often a simple question of preference, and mostly a matter of sticking to the default moveset because Jupiter is too slow, and Lunar too floaty and unwieldy.

Combined, they show that, rather than seek to add depth to Kat's basic moveset, Toyama and co have instead opted for breadth. Each style offers a variation on the same fundamentals: a quick, ground-based combo; an auto-targeting flying kick; Stasis Field, which lets Kat pick up a handful of objects of scenery and throw them at nearby foes, the move powered up with a longer button press; and a special move – a twirling corkscrew attack, a volley of thrown objects, a black hole – that obliterates everything in your sights. Yet the rhythm and the tempo of combat is largely unaffected by which style you choose, unless you're fighting an enemy that can only be destroyed by a single, class-specific technique. Apathy sets in quickly, the arrival of each new enemy prompting not an adrenaline surge, but a resigned eye roll.

Developer SIE Japan Studio, Project Siren
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Release Out now

Apathy sets in quickly, the arrival of each new enemy prompting not an adrenaline surge, but a resigned eye roll



SONIC ADVENTURE
Those that fell – in multiple directions – for the original *Gravity Rush* did so in part for its soundtrack, and composer Kohei Tanaka has returned for the sequel. Tanaka works primarily in anime and film – *Gravity Rush* aside, his only videogame work has been on *Alundra* and the *Sakura Wars* series. As such there's a dramatic, filmic quality to his work, and like its predecessor, *Gravity Rush 2* is all the better for it. Inevitably, however, there's a bum note: the piece that plays on an infinite loop in one of two major hub worlds, Jirga Para Lhao, is annoying enough at first. Ten hours later, once you've realised it sounds a little too much like We Wish You A Merry Christmas, you'll be reaching for the mute button.

It's a running theme. Mission design suggests a developer that, two games in, is still struggling to understand how best to make use of Kat's unique toolset. Many story missions are broken up into a series of short challenges, like side-missions parcelled up and given an arbitrary narrative purpose. Elsewhere, eavesdropping, escort, fetch and, worst of all, insta-fail stealth missions simply have no place in a game that purports to offer you such freedom. As in the original, *Gravity Rush 2* is at its best when you're using those core powers to do ridiculous things, but that simply doesn't happen often enough. A game that bends gravity itself has no business being this mundane.

Nor should it be quite so clunky. If you're going to completely redefine the meanings of up and down in a game, then your camera needs to be up to the task. *Gravity Rush 2*'s sadly isn't: it corkscrews around, it gets stuck in the scenery, it completely loses track of its protagonist at the most inconvenient moments. You'll die because you can't see yourself, let alone your killer; you'll fail a stealth mission by being spotted by an unseen guard. What should be a celebration of telling the rules of physics to sod off devolves quickly into a game of lining up objective markers in the middle of the screen and floating towards them, hoping nothing batters you from offscreen along the way.

Still, it has its moments. Time-trial challenges bring your traversal powers to the fore, while asynchronous multiplayer missions task you with finding a hidden treasure chest using a photo, taken by another player, as your guide. Once you find it, you can snap your own to leave for another adventurer; it's a fine twist on convention, letting you use Kat's ability to redefine perspective to craft a puzzle, rather than solve one. It's something the main game could've used more of.

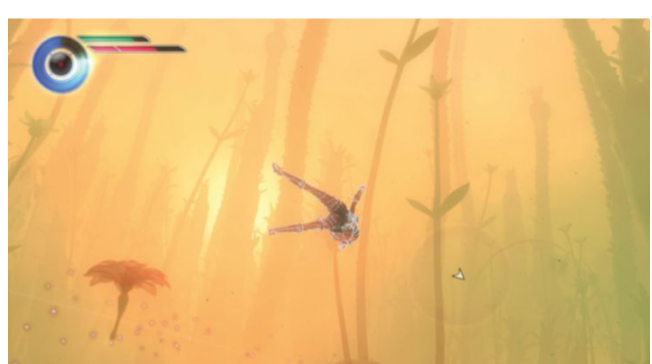
While hardly subtle in its depiction of its world's caste system – the poor are packed into shantytowns in the murky depths, the super-rich on their own sprawling islands in the sky – *Gravity Rush* does have a thing or two to say about the role of a capitalist middle class; whether it should serve those above it, or support the less fortunate. Kat, at least, wants to make everyone happy, no matter their social status, their motives or lack of manners. That's a noble goal, but an impossible one – and one the game that surrounds her, with its bland combat, its stodgy missions, and its wayward camera, fails to provide to the player.

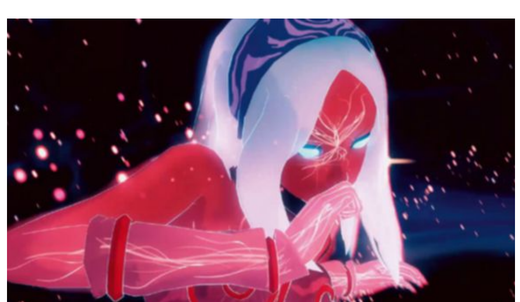
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RIGHT Objective markers are useful in many games, but essential here, since the gravity-flipping action can be so disorienting. We thought only VR games made us queasy. **MAIN** As in the first game, trails of pink gems are strewn about the landscape, and can be spent on upgrades for Kat's abilities. **BOTTOM** This is a beautiful game in places, though aggressive motion blur makes it hard to appreciate at times. That's assuming you've even worked out which way is up









ABOVE Boss battles end with cinematic finishing moves, kicked off with a press of the touchpad. Once Raven, another girl blessed with gravity powers, turns up, the two of you will polish the boss off together

Rise & Shine

Yes, OK, we get it: *videogames*. Barely a minute goes by in *Rise & Shine* without some kind of nod, wink, or top-of-the-lungs scream in reference to its host medium. You play a child, Rise, who is battling to save Gamearth from the invading Grunts, with the help of Shine, a talking, puzzle-solving pistol. Throughout there are references to the unseen 'guide' – that's you – helping the duo along. Rise is aware that he respawns when he fails. The final level of the game is called RPG City. At one point the dog from *Duck Hunt* pops up to detonate a bridge you're walking over. On and on it goes: some gags hit and some fall flat, but all show how an attempt to be slyly self-referential can often come across as a lack of imagination. Of course you guys love videogames. You make them for a living.

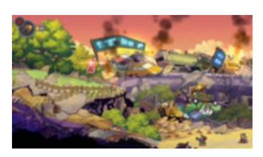
Still, there's plenty here to like in a game that successfully blends twitchy, almost bullet-hell arcade action and tricksy puzzle solving, often at the same time. The former is made a little easier with a double jump, speedy dash and the ability to duck behind indestructible cover, but complicated by the way this 2D game borrows from 3D shooters: you pull the left trigger to aim, then use the right stick to line up your shots. You'll need to reload, too – Shine's clip holds just ten bullets at the outset, though this can be upgraded as you progress – so there's a real emphasis on picking your shots, which is an exacting task when it's all you can do to stay alive in a hail of bullets. Some enemy ordnance can be shot out of the sky, but death comes easy and often. Thankfully, those thoroughly meta respawns rarely set you back too far.

Puzzles, meanwhile, involve using Shine's expanding toolset in increasingly tricksy ways. An alternate fire mode lets you slow a bullet down and control its flight path with the analogue stick; it can only be used in specific places, where you'll need to weave around to avoid obstacles, and often line up a perfect shot at the end, a final press of RT sending the bullet at full speed to its target. Later you'll gain explosive rounds and a grenade, which need to be used with precision.

This is not a long game, but it can often feel like one: certain combat sections can only be completed with what feels like a perfect run, and you'll often credit the game with too much intelligence in its puzzle design. The constant torrent of videogame references is perhaps a matter of taste, though there's too much of it towards the end, when it feels as if the developers are padding things out with a shoutout to every game they loved as kids. It's hard to find too much fault in a game that's so in love with its inspirations, but *Rise & Shine* is at its best when it's being itself.

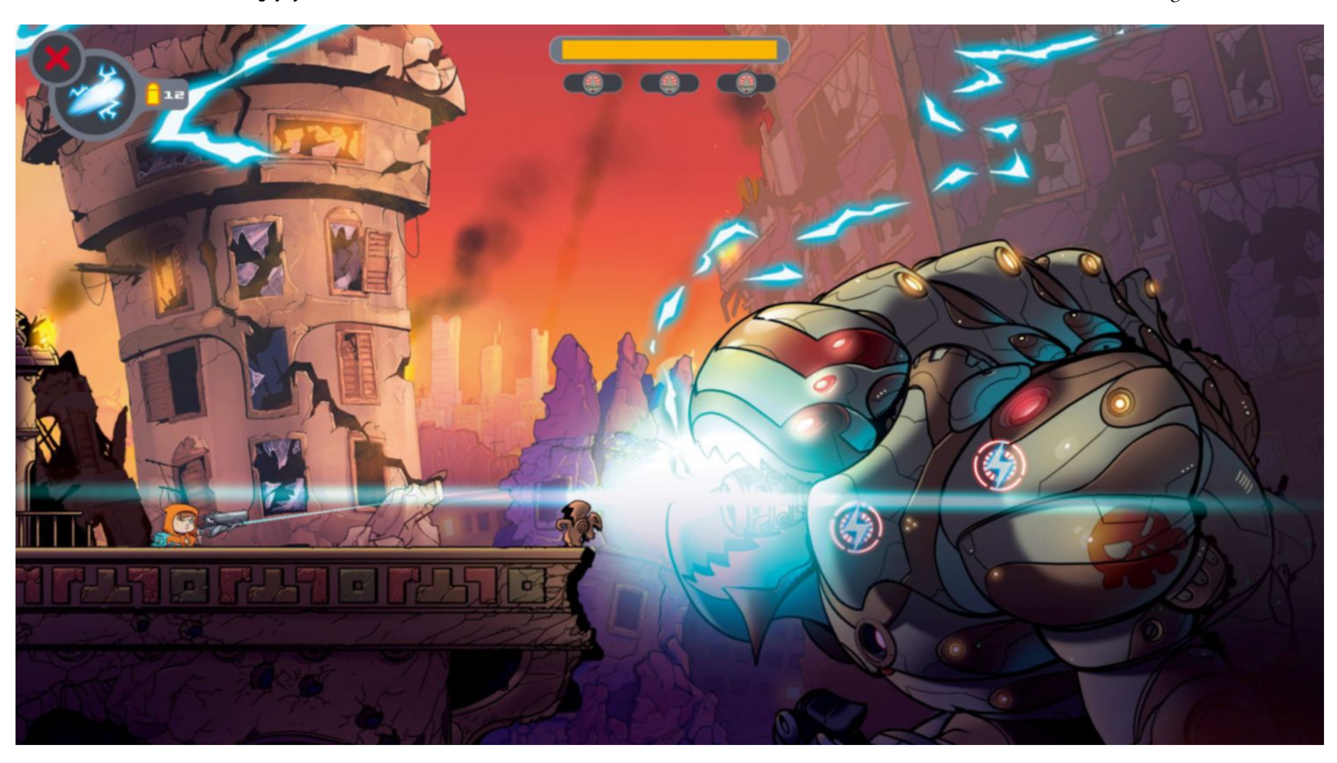

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Developer Super Awesome Hyper Dimensional Mega Team
Publisher Adult Swim
Format PC, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now



HE SHOOTS, HE SCORES

On the approach to the final battle in RPG City you'll find NPC Village, where a parade of citizens force you to beat score milestones in a series of minigames before letting you progress. A clay-pigeon shoot evokes *Duck Hunt* – but not as overtly as elsewhere – before you're asked to lob grenades through a series of basketball hoops, each farther away than the previous one. The highlight insists you control a bullet in a circular field and avoid all enemy ordnance for as long as possible, a delightful nod to *Geometry Wars*' Pacifism achievement.



In a turn against convention, boss encounters are among the easier challenges in *Rise & Shine*, since big targets make for easy aiming. As is so often the case, it's the little guys you need to watch out for

Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World

Nintendo might insist Switch isn't a replacement for 3DS, but at first glance *Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World* seems like the sort of game that would only be released on hardware in its twilight. Then again, in a few months *Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D* will be four years old. Consider *Super Mario Maker*, too – not just a way to squeeze more from existing assets, but an opportunity to reach a wider audience than it ever could on a languishing home console. This sits somewhere between those two: it's a little more than a compromised port, though its extra features are unlikely to make Wii U owners feel like they're missing out.

The inevitable visual downgrade has a less debilitating effect than you might expect. The original may have been sold on its handcrafted aesthetic, but Good-Feel has retained much of the tactile pleasure of your interactions with it, whether it be tying up or unravelling enemies or pushing against soft walls and watching them wrinkle as they reveal a cache of hidden gems. Yes, some of the subtler details are absent – the lighting is markedly flatter, for starters – but the 3D effect helps with the illusion of solidity.

It also shifts the focus towards the game itself. The level design is more diverse than we remember: a pleasant side effect, perhaps, of being less distracted by the superficial sameyness. One stage, where a wireframe Chain Chomp becomes a woollen wrecking ball, is a minor classic. In the final world, the same idea is cleverly repurposed as deadly Boos become harmless balloons carrying you to higher platforms. Curtains become a mode of transport on one stage, shooting across rails as if tugged by an impatient, invisible hand, as you shimmy up and down to snag collectibles; later, spectral drapes glide by to reveal platforms in silhouette, turning floating wisps into hungry, demonic nasties.

The new material is cute but inessential. Special gems that once yielded Miiverse stamps now unlock patterns with which you can craft your own Yoshi design. Poochy gets a small selection of auto-runner stages that feel like a dry run for a potential iOS spinoff. And three pups give the Mellow difficulty setting even more of a sedate Sunday-afternoon feel, as they provide a source of infinite ammo while binding nearby enemies and highlighting secrets – though their beady eyes make them look more sinister than adorable. It's still a reminder that Nintendo is too often tethered to its past – in Yoshi's transformations alone, Good-Feel borrows from its own *Kirby's Epic Yarn* as well as *New Super Mario Bros* – but this cosy, likeable platformer gives 3DS players a superior alternative to Arzest's insipid *New Island*.

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Developer Good-Feel
Publisher Nintendo
Format 3DS
Release Out now



ACCRUE THE POOCH
If you're an Amiibo collector, you should know that many of the latest figures can be scanned for fresh yarn patterns, should you have ever wondered how Yoshi would look if cosplaying as, say, Blathers from *Animal Crossing* or either of *Splatoon*'s Squid Sisters. Scanning a Poochy Amiibo mid-course allows Yoshi's faithful companion to join him without the usual gem outlay; doing so during the bonus stages unlocks a time-attack mode.

Maybe it's simply better suited to a handheld, but the game seems to move at a slightly brisker pace than in its original guise on Wii U. The knockabout co-op mode of the original is missing here, though









The Little Acre

Developer Pewter Games
Publisher Curve Digital
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

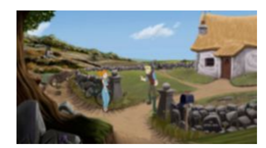
This beguiling, short-form, magical-realist adventure from Dublin-based Pewter Games opens with an immediately identifiable scene, as bumbling, job-seeking father Aidan attempts to get dressed without waking his daughter Lily. It's a strong start, serving as an effective introduction to the game's gentle point-and-click puzzles, as well as its rich vein of physical comedy and the warmth of its storytelling. *The Little Acre*'s lightweight challenge might mean it's better suited to a younger audience, but any parent will experience a pang of recognition at having to surreptitiously retrieve an item of clothing from beneath their slumbering offspring. Granted, we've never had to rely on a dog's halitosis to successfully pull off such a delicate operation, but it's a solid punchline all the same.

What follows is a mostly lighthearted piece of whimsy that rattles along at a lively pace. Having set up the father-daughter dynamic, the game quickly establishes that Lily's mother is recently deceased and Aidan's inventor dad has gone missing. No sooner has he begun his search than he's spirited away to another world, at which point control shifts to Lily, who must negotiate the tricky task of making her own porridge before hunting for her newly absent father. Meanwhile, her canine protector, the clearly long-suffering Dougal, attempts to first stop her setting fire to the house, and then prevent her from a precarious climb to fetch a fresh bag of porridge oats. It mightn't sound too thrilling, but it's a delightful set-piece elevated by sharp writing, robust voice work and wonderful animation. An executive producer credit for Charles Cecil isn't the only reason *Broken Sword* comes to mind.

Control switches between the two for the rest of the game, but as the scenes grow shorter and the transitions more frequent, the narrative becomes a bit fragmented. Solutions to puzzles come quickly: partly because they're consistently logical, if occasionally exacting about timing, but also because you'll rarely be carrying more than three objects. Given the limited number of interaction spots, you'll only need to try a handful of combinations before you stumble across the right one.

The stakes are raised in the closing stretch, but the drama is undercut by the story's brevity. What at first seemed lean starts to feel rushed, and one emotional moment in particular isn't quite earned: it comes too suddenly, is dealt with too abruptly, and is all but swept under the carpet by the end. Still, while not exactly a vintage point-and-click, this good-natured fable serves its purpose as a calling card for a developer whose talents are in ample evidence. Hopefully, this is a sign of better – and bigger – things to come.

6



TOON BLARNEY
The rural '50s Irish setting is well realised, though in truth it's not the environmental detail you'll notice first. Instead, it's the character animation, reminiscent of the work of Don Bluth, that draws the eye: it isn't always the smoothest, but it's joyously expressive, with most interactions prompting a unique physical response from Aidan or Lily. It's less effective when you're exploring, with some questionable scaling: in a few places, Aidan feels awkwardly superimposed onto the world.

Most objects are used once and then discarded, but there are a few items you'll want to retain. This mask, for example, is particularly useful for scaring animals, though it doesn't necessarily work on every creature



Batman: The Telltale Series

Say what you will about Joel Schumacher, but he never managed to make Batman quite this boring. Telltale's take on the Dark Knight is rarely outright bad, but in a way it does something much worse, consistently wasting its best ideas, and backing off any time it threatens to be more interesting. The result is a story that is by turns inert and frustrating, bland and contrived. Its twists, surprises, cliffhangers and big decisions rarely grow organically from the narrative; rather, they strain for shock value to kid you into believing this is good drama. And by the end, the whole thing has collapsed like a soggy soufflé.

It's all the more regrettable because there's some strong narrative material here. The notion of Bruce Wayne being forced to confront dormant secrets from his family's dark past has potential; likewise, the dubious political machinations of Harvey Dent, and the links between Arkham Asylum and a terrorist group bent on exposing Gotham's corrupt underbelly. But the script struggles to keep all these balls in the air and loses confidence in its ability to retain your attention, introducing new threats and villains whenever the pace starts to drop, and beating you over the head with subtext. "Her mask inspires fear," Alfred begins, pausing portentously before adding, just in case we hadn't made the obvious connection, "Not unlike Batman."

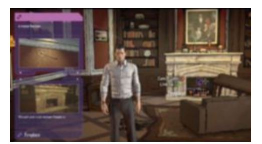
Bruce Wayne and his alter ego are the only characters who get sufficient screen time, but whichever guise you choose, you're usually lumbered with expositional dialogue or unevenly choreographed QTEs. That might partly explain why a curiously restrained Troy Baker never quite gets under the skin of either role, and why such experienced talent among the supporting cast struggle to match their best work. Undercooked drama becomes unintentional comedy whenever Oswald Cobblepot shows up with a laughably bad accent. Laura Bailey vamps it up as a pleasingly ambiguous Selina Kyle, but her encounters with Wayne mostly amount to the same conversation repeated several times over.

Kyle and Dent are abruptly cast aside for a finale in which the plot holes grow wider still, notably during one sequence involving a hidden message that makes no sense at all. One of the season opener's best ideas, entirely forgotten for the middle act, makes a brief reappearance, before an overlong QTE fight and a flat cliffhanger round things off in wholly underwhelming fashion. By then, a narrative that promised to explore the darker corners of Gotham and the Wayne psyche has barely tiptoed into the shadows before timidly retreating into the comic-book comfort zone. Holy disappointment, Batman.

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The antagonist's motivations are belatedly exposed, though the tragedy of their backstory is undersold. A potentially revealing spell in Arkham is over similarly swiftly and is just an excuse to introduce Season Two's villain

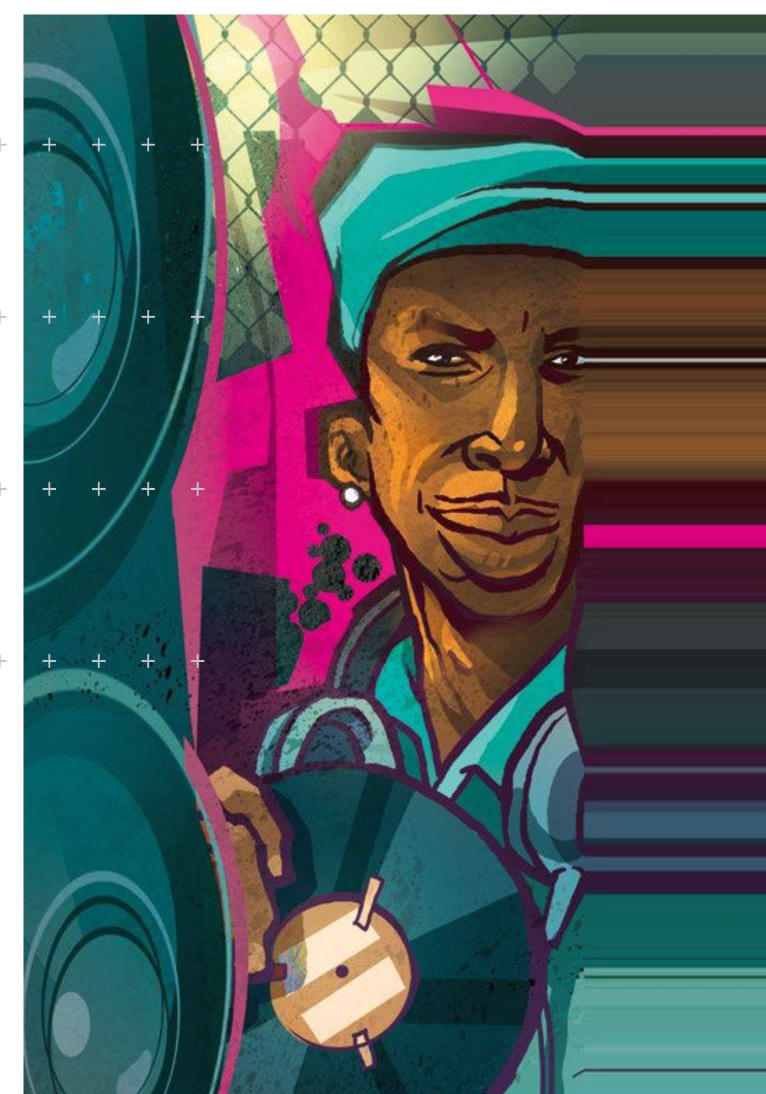
Developer/publisher Telltale Games
Format 360, Android, iOS, PC (tested), PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now



DICK MOVES
Batman has a few crime scenes to investigate, reconstructing events from the visible evidence left behind with the aid of some portable Bat-tech. You're asked to highlight the relevant clues and link them together, although the connections are often so obvious as to render the process meaningless, while making the world's greatest detective look positively slow on the uptake. Other links require questionable leaps of logic: who knew Alfred was so handy with a pool cue?







DJ Hero

The overlooked beat-juggling music workout that scratched a unique itch

By Nathan Brown

Developer Freestyle Games **Publisher** Activision **Format** 360, PS2, PS3, Wii **Release** 2009

Freestyle Games has never seemed particularly interested in the easy life. For its first game, the 2006 release *B-Boy*, the UK studio had to work out how to tool a breakdancing game around PSP's D-pad and buttons. For its most recent release, *Guitar Hero Live*, it redesigned the series' classic five-button controller, then used robot cameras and hundreds of actors to film a live-action game where your crowd and bandmates responded to your performance. Game development is, ultimately, a matter of solving problems, but few studios have gone so far out of their way to create so many headaches for themselves as Freestyle.

DJ Hero was the most problematic of them all, and it feels like little coincidence that it's also Freestyle's finest work to date. While *B-Boy*'s control system was difficult to design, at least the project began with something to work from in Sony's PSP. And while *Guitar Hero Live* involved making a new guitar controller, Freestyle at least had a decade's worth of plastic-guitar games to work from when designing both the peripheral and the way that songs would be played on it. But with *DJ Hero*, it had nothing. First, it would have to define how two turntables and a mixer could be meaningfully, plausibly condensed to a single peripheral of reasonable size. Then it would have to work out how the game would be played; how the music would be mapped onto the controller's various inputs, then how the genre-standard descending note chart could be adapted to convey this new information. It would have to feel *right*, both to the experienced beatmatcher and to the novice whose only prior interaction with a DJ booth had been a drunkenly barked request for their party banger of choice.

It would have to go further than that, too, but let's start with the basics. *DJ Hero*'s controller is a single turntable – a spinnable platter with three buttons on the left-hand side, coloured green, red and blue. To the side sits a crossfader, an effects dial, a button to trigger Euphoria mode, and a panel that flips up to reveal a D-pad and set of face buttons, used for navigating menus. As the note chart descends, you'll tap the platter buttons to trigger samples, flicking the crossfader to the left, right or neutral position in time with abrupt doglegs in the chart, parts of the mix cutting out and back in accordingly. Successful inputs raise a multiplier, which can be doubled by triggering Euphoria (acquired, as in other music games, by perfecting specific song sections) or with a rewind, a backwards spin of the platter letting you replay the past few bars. Judicious use of both is essential in reaching a high score and five-star rating; Euphoria automates the crossfader, making it vital for passing tricky sections, while rewinds are best used to replay busy song sections to maximise the score bonus.

Well, we call it a 'song', but it's the wrong word. These are called 'mixes', and are mashups of famous and not-so-famous tunes from across the decades. Every music game is a reflection of its creator's musical taste: *Rez* showcases Tetsuya Mizuguchi's love of repetitive beats, while the original *Guitar Hero* is a reflection of Harmonix staffers' affection for buzzing, crunching, wailing guitars. *DJ Hero* shows that hip-hop runs deep in Freestyle Games' veins, but it goes further than that. It shows that the studio understands what makes a mashup – blending two recognisable tunes in smart, surprising, often funny ways – and what makes good turntablism, where DJ-ing stops being just about a party and starts to resemble a sport. So hip-hop gets mashed up with pop, funk, soul, rock, techno – anything that shares, or can be sped up or slowed down to share, a hip-hop tempo – and is played back in a way that requires an escalating amount of flicking switches and pressing buttons in time to the beat.

It meant adding an additional layer of complexity to what was already a very difficult project. Not only did Freestyle have to design a controller from scratch, and work out how music could be played on it; it had to design the music itself, too, taking sets of two well-known tunes and making something new out of them – something that would be fun to play, sure, but also designed to get a dancefloor moving. Freestyle Games was the hardware designer, the software designer and now, on top of that, the DJ and producer as well.

The solution involved outsourcing to some of the biggest names in the game – ▶

both figuratively and, later, through the addition of in-game avatars, literally. Eminem and Jay-Z were consultants; the likes of DJ Shadow, Jazzy Jeff and Cut Chemist contributed mixes to the game, as did Grandmaster Flash, the turntablism pioneer who also voices the introductory tutorial. Work began with a straight mashup, typically computer programmed but which could plausibly be played on two decks and a mixer. Then the 'gameplay' version would be created, the real-world stars or Freestyle's designers adding rapid crossfader cuts, implausible scratches and volleys of overlaid effects. When making a *Guitar Hero* game, a designer can only ever approximate the real thing, condensing six strings and 22 frets onto a six-button control scheme. By the time a *DJ Hero* mix was complete, it let the player perform something no turntablist on the planet could ever do with their bare hands in a live setting. Famous guitarists everywhere used to line up to criticise *Guitar Hero* for its simplification of the instrument; *DJ Hero*, by contrast, was like an Action Replay cartridge for beat-jugglers.

The results can be astonishing, thoroughly danceable and often truly surprising. Load up the mix of David Bowie's Let's Dance and Marvin Gaye's I Heard It Through The Grapevine, for instance, and you'll be faced with a 130bpm UK-garage bass workout. No good DJ fears the odd bit of low-hanging fruit, mind you, and the blend of Ice, Ice Baby and U Can't Touch This works exactly as you'd expect, and is all the better for it. Elsewhere, you'll find playful lyrical combinations – Queen and Daft Punk hook up for a refrain of 'We will, we will robot rock', while a repurposed Foreigner chorus now speaks of a DJ hero, instead of a jukebox one – and all manner of cross-genre soundclashes: Dizzee Rascal over Justice, Young MC atop Daft Punk, The Beastie Boys on Blondie. The result isn't just a fine soundtrack for a music game, but a rump-shaking party playlist to boot.

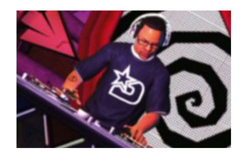
And one, mercifully it turns out, with no fail state. Missing notes simply means part of the mix is absent for a few beats, and impacts your score and star rating. No one ever calls for a rewind when the DJ's just dropped a clanger, after all. But you'll want to get better, not least because to hear the 'true' version of a mix you'll need to play on the highest difficulty, Expert. When playing *Guitar Hero*, you'll be strumming along to the same song regardless of the difficulty level; the number of notes you have to hit simply scales down as you lower the difficulty. Yet in *DJ Hero*, removing a note, cut or scratch also means removing the effect it produces from the mix itself; this is a game whose soundtrack improves along with your skill level, providing not just a new challenge, but also a new result.

That assumes, of course, that you can get to Expert without your hand dropping off. In the final third of the game Freestyle



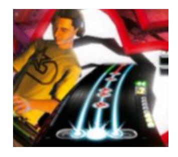
As well as licensed stars, *DJ Hero* features a selection of standard avatars, and arenas to play in – from jumping block parties to neon-lit festivals

IT LET THE PLAYER PERFORM SOMETHING NO TURNTABLIST COULD EVER DO WITH THEIR BARE HANDS IN A LIVE SETTING



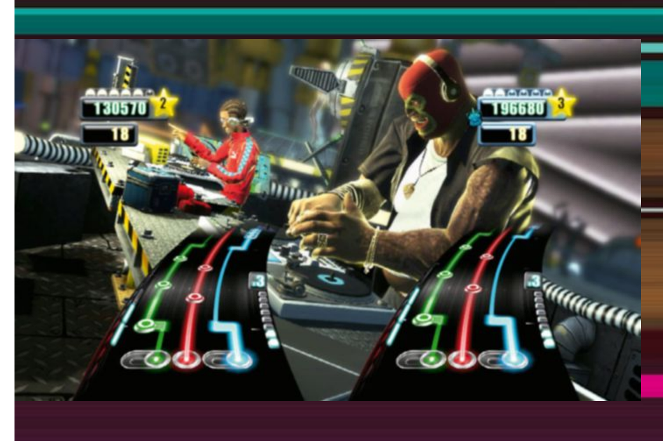


DJ Jazzy Jeff and Daft Punk are among the acts to feature as playable characters, as well as contributing mixes to the game



NOT FORGOT

A laundry list of famous acts feature in *DJ Hero*, but only one was truly immortalised. Adam 'DJ AM' Goldstein, once a member of pop-rock outfit Crazy Town and a resident DJ at Caesars Palace, died of a drug overdose in August 2009, just two months before *DJ Hero*'s launch. Tim Riley, the Activision exec most closely involved with sourcing music and talent for the game, paid tribute, saying he hoped it would "be a fitting tribute to his creative spirit". Freestyle, meanwhile, caused headaches for manufacturing and distribution channels by working a tribute to Goldstein into a game whose build candidate had already been submitted.



Multiplayer is only playable offline with the purchase of a second turntable, though a guitar controller can be used for twoplayer rock-rap mixes

switches tack from cheery programmed party mixes to punishing exercises in genuine turntablism, with a selection of playlists performed by a host of real-world DJs. Daft Punk's lengthy setlist feels like an endurance test, but is little more than the warmup act. The real challenge comes in the game's effective final boss, assembled by the Scratch Perverts; they're a trio in real life, but here you're working alone. Until this point, mixes have been made up of two songs, but suddenly there's only one. First comes Beats & Pieces, an aural lesson of dance music history that starts with lazy, 70bpm hip-hop, then works up through classic house and roaring jungle Amens on the way to a gabba-techno climax at a speed of 200bpm. After that comes an electro workout on Noisia's Groundhog, left alone aside from the Perverts' frantic scratching and overlaid samples from a posho Brit who goads you into quitting. You'll be tempted, but there's no time to take your hand off the turntable, and by this point RSI may prevent you from lifting the flap and pressing the Start button in any case.

It's by no means perfect: some mixes are disappointing, others a matter of taste, and a selection of setlists that let a second player join in with a guitar controller feel like more of an Activision business decision than a Freestyle creative one, and you can tell the studio's heart isn't really in it. But once your wrist has recovered from the workout you'll be back, time and again, digging peripherals and old consoles out of the loft, because what *DJ Hero* offers isn't available anywhere else – its soundtrack unique to this disc, made for a single game by some of the biggest names in the business but playable only on this controller.

Sales were, somewhat inevitably, disappointing, this bundle of innovation blithely, but unavoidably, lumped in with the guitar-based games with which it shared a name. Even industry analysts, pointing towards slow sales of recent *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* games, were too enthusiastic in their predictions. A sequel, which sought to hitch itself to the nascent EDM bandwagon, sold even more poorly, and a planned 3DS version was cancelled. It was a sad end for a game that always deserved so much more, the work of a studio that planned out the ultimate party from scratch, and pulled it off with a flourish. ■

The game's commitment to authenticity extends to the DJ booth. Daft Punk, for example, are bent over mixing boards, not turntables







JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

One of my bosses of old once spent three weeks in Japan in an attempt to work out what they wanted from games developed in the west, and assigning blood types to every in-game character was pretty much the sum of everything he learned. I have no idea if this information was true, or was true once but isn't now. I like the idea that for a brief period in the '90s and 2000s all the Pacific Rim nations were obsessed by blood types, only for it to dwindle and be replaced by a fascination for something equally weird, like the shoe size of combatants in side-scrolling fighting games.

Technically, blood-type information comes under the banner of backstory. Backstory has often been the bane of my life. For some reason it's not usually enough for a game to just start, explain what the player has to do, and just get on with it. People, it seems, want to know what the situation was before the game starts. If two factions are at war, the reasons why are always going to be important because it sorts out the goodies from the baddies, but do we need to know what was going on before the war even kicked off? Why is the land like it is? Have there been other conflicts? If so, were they resolved peacefully? And while we're at it, what are the main crops of this world? Where does that river flow? How did those mountains form? You see how it can be never-ending.

The perception is that consumers are going to want all this info. They're going to swamp the forums with questions about characters, locations and history; nobody is going to enjoy the game if they have a single unanswered query about it. In some respects it's a compliment, indicating that the game-buying public care about the title enough to think about it in detail. But I believe that not many of them do. In all likelihood, players just start, learn how to play, and then crash on until victory or boredom overcomes them. As developers, we're just second-guessing what people want to know, and the fact that one vocal fan asks some vaguely pertinent questions on a Facebook page doesn't mean everybody is clamouring for backstory and won't sleep until they get it.



I like the idea that for a brief period in the '90s and 2000s all the Pacific Rim nations were obsessed by blood types

The thing is, I do rather enjoy fleshing out game worlds. I've always been fascinated by canon – where games, films or series of books have a set of known facts and truths, not all of which are relevant, but which all fit together to make a big, explorable universe one can immerse oneself in. Not long ago I worked on a fantasy game, and those are easily the best for backstory creation. For every item in the game there had to be a history, and every place had to have a tale of how it came to be. The characters – and there were lots – had family trees, and wherever possible links had to be made between them to provide intrigue and possibly plot points for the future. Making all this up was frankly glorious. And every so often there was the chance to connect things up in neat ways. For example, the tree from which a vital NPC gets hanged turns out to have grown from a staff thrust into the ground by the same character's father. It's not earth-shattering stuff, but little connections like this are extremely satisfying to me.

Having created a tome of lore for this world, of course the team wanted to use it wherever possible. They proposed a whole load of flashbacks to show some of the clever little links we'd devised in the world. And this, of course, was where it could all have gone disastrously wrong. Backstory of this sort has no place being thrust into the faces of the players. First, as we've discussed, how many people really want to bother with it? And second, actively presenting it stops it from being backstory and makes it story. And anything presented to a player will be perceived as something they need to know in order to complete the game. Stumble across something in a game and you know that, while it might be helpful in some way, it won't be vital. Be led to it by the nose, as in the case of these flashbacks, and you pay attention because you're being told. And frankly, shoving the depth, consistency and history of a world into someone's face is showing off. And it's very annoying.

So the great interlocking world behind my fantasy game contained a treasure trove of nice but useless information and rich tales of characters and locations you'd never get to see. And the response of the three players who cared enough to explore it was not what I expected. I mean, they liked it, but decided among themselves that we'd done it cynically simply so that we could write a prequel. Which, come to think of it, would be amazing.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **Box Kite Curve**

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